ARTIFACT OF EVIL

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by Gary Gygax

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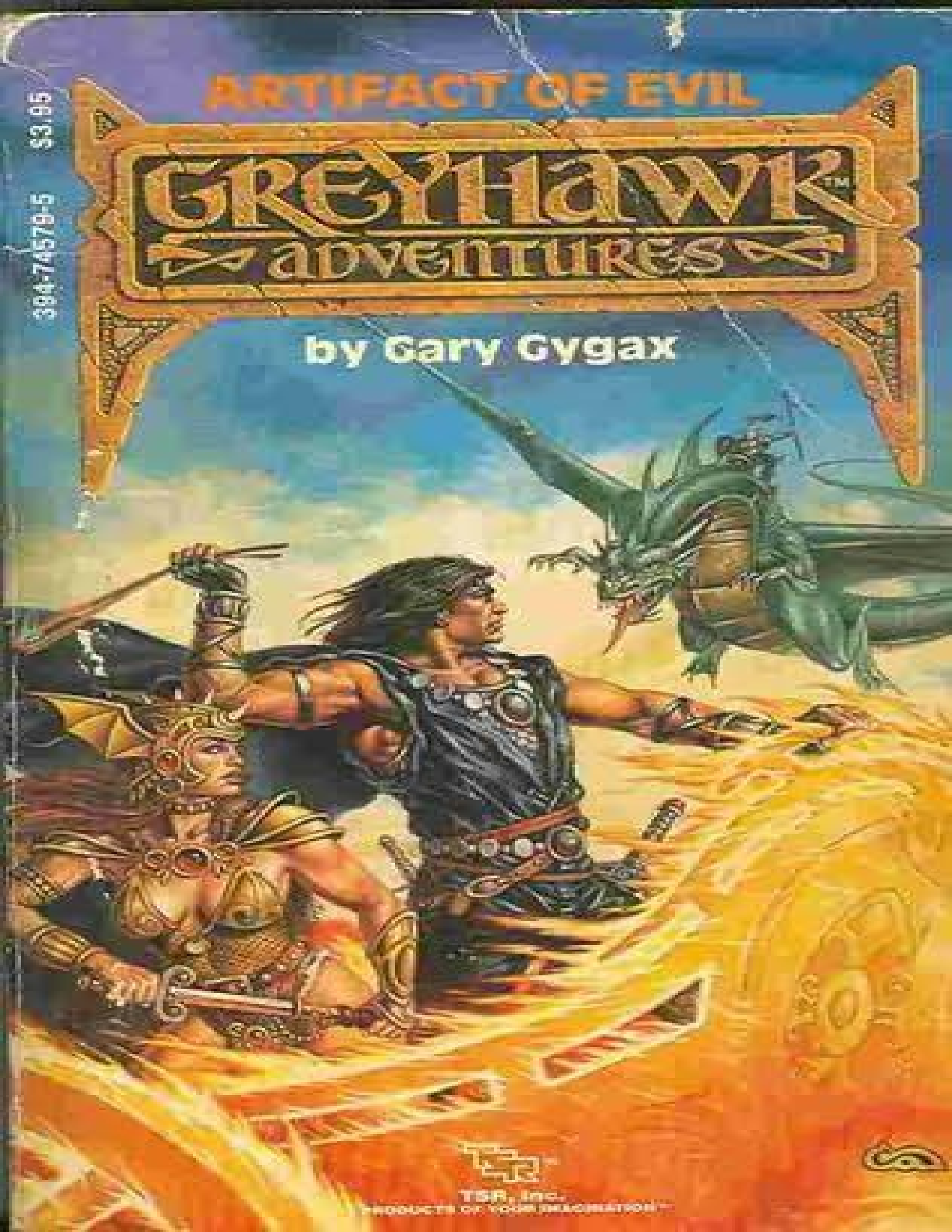

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Artifact of Evil

Gord the Rogue series

by Gary Gygax

Chapter 1

Horns bellowed in answer to the screaming trumpets that sounded from the high towers of the concentric castle. The starless night was suddenly bright with globes of glowing light, radiance that shed betraying illumination behind the lines of besiegers outside the fortress. Men and machines were moving across the trampled ground toward the great stone walls. Arrows, quarrels, and streaking missiles of magical origin flew toward the encircling soldiers. Some arrows and quarrels lodged in wooden mantlets or struck into shields, but others sank into flesh. The magic missiles, blazing fireballs, and crackling bolts of lightning were far worse. Bodies were tossed high by roaring blasts; wheeled shelters were split and broken by the flashing strokes of electricity while metal-clad men-at-arms behind them became charred corpses. Varicolored darts sped unerringly into hapless targets who screamed and died. Torrents of flame erupted from the sky to set siege towers blazing, giant torches that added a hellish light to the scene, while raging fires swept over the advancing lines or made curtains of flame that seared their flesh.

From these conflagrations sprang huge, manlike forms. The very flames formed them, and these great things strode forth from the fires to further wreak death and destruction on the attacking army. Glowing tentacles sprouted up from the earth itself and wrapped their fiery coils around war machines and men. Flesh and blood could not stand such an inferno. The lines of soldiers quickly became scattered, fleeing men seeking escape from flaming death, their ranks decimated, all cohesion gone. Arrows and buzzing crossbow bolts sought out the retreating attackers and exacted further toll, while chains of blazing, blue lightning leaped among them, slaying and completing the devastation.

The battle was not all one-sided, of course. While the defenders in the great castle wrought their destruction, the ringing soldiery had countered with showers of arrows, but parapet and merlon protected the defenders, and bolt and shaft most often splintered harmlessly against stone. Rocks and boulders smashed into bartizan and tower, impacted wall, or arced over into the courtyard, before fire silenced catapult and trebuchet. Thick, spearlike missiles flew also, until, likewise burned, the ballistae that shot them forth were blazing bonfires. There were a few, pitiful spells cast too - silvery darts and opalescent rays of cold light, even a few blasts of fire - but these had slight effect. It seemed that the spell-casters of the besieging force

were unable to withstand those within the great fortress, for the former had to work relatively unprotected, while those within were not so exposed. Abruptly, the scene changed.

Almost simultaneously, the bright spheres of light that revealed the attacking army went out. In turn, the sky above the castle was bright, and the place was illuminated with something that resembled the light from a full moon, while the area round about its walls was dark, save for burning equipment and fiery elementals still delivering death. As all this occurred, drenching bursts of rain issued forth from directly above the huge fire elementals, while gentler precipitation fell upon burning wood. The fire elementals, four in number, hissed and roared their anger and pain as the pelting drops of water vaporized upon them, sending forth steaming clouds and cooling the monsters' flames.

One of these glowing elementals was near the partially filled moat. A pillar of water suddenly arose, formed itself, and grappled with its fiery counterpart. Even as the two giant elementals struggled, a new sort of elemental creature arose from the rain-soaked earth, this one formed of damp dirt and stone and clay. Earth and fire contested, as did fire and water. Men watching from the castle or the surrounding camp of the besiegers saw the blazing fire elementals' flames become smothered and wink out.

Bass twangs and thumps came from the encircling force, and arcing boulders and massive spears again rained upon the curtain walls, the towers, and the castle courtyard and buildings inside it. The radiance illuminating the fortress was extinguished but almost immediately replaced by globes of light such as those that lit the scenes behind the attacking forces. Some hung above the place; others seemed to emanate from turret top, bartizan, and tower. The contesting spell-casters seemed to be playing a game, for globes of utter darkness would intermingle with the bright spheres and neutralize each other, while yet fresh lights would spring up elsewhere.

As this all occurred, the defenders on wall and tower were plain to see, and sniping fire from longbow and heavy crossbow began to score successes. Here and there, men dropped after suddenly sprouting a clothyard shaft or the feathers of a thumb-thick crossbow bolt.

The rumbling and murmur of advancing troops were again discernible to the castle's defenders. Despite the terrible punishment dealt to their initial foray, the troops were again advancing to storm the walls. Somehow, the soldiers had been rallied, reinforced, and sent back. Trumpet and drum

sounded within the fortress, calling every possible defender to man the walls for a last defensive effort. Their magic-users and clerics had spent their powers on the destruction of the first attack; the fresh assault would have to rely on flesh and blood, armor and weapon, to hurl the attackers back from the stronghold. The castle's own, smaller versions of the attackers' war machines were put into play. Springnal and catapult began working while rocks were readied, cauldrons of burning charcoal and bubbling oil swung out over machicolated battlements, and ram-catchers assembled.

A column assembled in the outer bailey. The great gates of the fortress were opened, the iron portcullis winched up, and the oaken drawbridge let drop with a clatter and a bang. Out into the pale morning came a swarm of hulking, mailed ogres brandishing huge morning stars, six-foot swords, and other massive weapons.

With them were even more malign creatures - a score or more of hideous trolls, monsters needing no weapons save their iron-hard talons and teeth. Their stooped, shambling gait made the trolls seem smaller than the thicker ogres, but occasionally one would stiffen and stand upright to peer ahead. Then their height, more than half again man-size, and a full head taller than their ugly companions, could be seen. Huge trolls and great ogres, nearly a hundred in total, issued forth, crossed the oak of the drawbridge, and fanned out. These were the terrible advance guard of the castle's sally.

More trumpets blared, and behind the advance guard came a force of gnolls - hyena-faced things, seven feet tall, and armed and armored as men would be. Their great bows taut, bardiches and glaives ready, they came in hundreds, barking and giggling as they advanced, lusting for the feast of battle and flesh to come. If the castle was besieged, it by no means felt itself at the mercy of the army doing so.

"At last. The filth from below is vomited forth!" Thus spoke the general commanding the ringing host. As he said this, he waved his arm in a signal, and the echoing rumble of kettle drums filled the morning.

Bristling phalanxes of pikemen, supported by mailed cavalry, moved to meet the ogres and gnolls, while archers and crossbowmen began to direct a flaming volley of burning missiles toward the knots of rampaging trolls. The field before the castle gate was quickly swirled with men and humanoids locked in mortal combat. Champions and spell-casters of the attacking army were now engaging the trolls, immune as they were to most

harm that ordinary folk could cause. These contests were terrible things indeed, and many men fell before the on-rushing green monsters. This pleased the crimson-robed priests who observed the melee from the castle's highest tower. The bright light of the sun climbing higher into the heavens, however, also revealed a curious fact to these observers. Where ranks of charred corpses and slain bodies should have been, the commanders of the fortress saw only slight evidence of the slaughter which had been wrought by spells and elementals before daylight. Instead of soldiers slain in windrows and devastated by firestorms, there were but scores of dead, not hundreds or thousands.

"This is wrong! Where are the ruins of the siege towers and war machines?" demanded one of the greater of their number.

Priests whose vestments were trimmed in fiery orange or tawny shades, as opposed to the bright gold work on the speaker's gown, dared make no answer; but one in deep red and bright crimson replied, "Where indeed?" and, turning to the huddle of his lessers, commanded one of their number haughtily. "Go!" he ordered. "Request that the others hasten here with all speed!"

One of the clerics scurried off, while the remainder of the group again turned their scrutiny to the fighting below. The first charge had pushed the attacking forces backward in a great bow, but their lines of armored men and horses had not broken. Now it was the turn of the sallying humanoids and monsters to be forced away, back toward the castle's barbican and massive gatehouse. The four companies of hyenalike gnolls were now hard pressed by infantry, while skirmishing crossbowmen sent humming quarrels into the humanoid bands' flanks. The ogres too were being slowly decimated, the survivors shoved back by pike and pole arm, the towering creatures subject to well-aimed shafts and bolts from rear-rank fighters. True, both gnolls and ogres had exacted a great price upon the attacking soldiers, but the observers in the castle could see it was a mere pinprick compared to the total force that ringed the beleaguered stronghold.

Of the three sorts of creatures that formed the counterattacking force, the twenty or so trolls were fewest in number and most effective in their devastation. Ten times their number had fallen to them before the first troll went down under burning arrows and hacking blades. Its sundered pieces attempted to rejoin themselves even as the loathsome monster began regenerating its own wounded and scorched flesh. A squad of sappers came

suddenly to the area where its throes marked the situation, carrying with them pots of smoldering coals. Soon smoke and flame came from their efforts, and the greasy, black plumes marked the final end of one after another of these oil-soaked, dismembered limbs. Others of the trolls went to quicker deaths, struck by lesser magic-users mere evokers and conjurers, but armed with slim wands that spat missiles of magical sort and flame as well. It was evident that they had been saved for just such a purpose, and they now went about their duties with efficient action, shielded by fighting men and even clerics in brown or green garments.

The surviving humanoids fell back first, their retreat toward the castle quickly becoming a panicked route as the men pressed them. With them went the ogres, now interested only in saving themselves from sharp pike and broad-headed arrow. The drawbridge was hauled rapidly up, however, to shut fast the gate, and gnolls and ogres alike had no recourse but to turn and fight to the death, having been abandoned to their fate by the heartless commanders of the castle.

The trolls, too stupid to fear the inevitable, also fought until burned to vile ashes or reduced to a welter of stinking jelly by showers of acid that caused their crawling flesh to smolder and run. The last of this transpired under the gaze of the crimson-clad watchers, augmented now by another handful of men.

"We must get relief soon, or the castle falls!" said the leader of these clerics. "Where is Horval Crook-finger?"

A tall, thin man, clad in a robe of purple so dark that only the brilliance of the sun revealed its true shade, stepped forward at the summons and bowed, his hand held over the embroidered red trigon on his chest.

"Your command, Elder Brother?" the man asked meekly.

"You fools were duped by mere phantasms, false visions!" roared the commander. "The entire dweomer of our assembled spell-casters was spent on the destruction of illusions! Why did no one call me forth?"

The magic-user standing before the enraged commander of the castle's garrison made no answer, nor did any of the others. Who dared remind the speaker that he himself had commanded absolute privacy? None among the assemblage would brave him when he was lost in poppy juice and lotus smoke.

"Fools!" he repeated, and then took another long look at the tableaux beneath. The last of the trolls was a writhing bonfire, the gnolls and ogres

were trampled and dead, and the attackers were storming the gate's outworks, ladders against barbican.

"Go, Crook-finger! Use scrying to alert those ores that they must leave off bickering with the Ho-jebli. Both must march to our succor at once!"

"I dare not use crystal or fluid, Elder Brother," the purple-robed man replied fearfully. "I have tried already, and the enemy spell-binders nearly had my mind."

"So - another useless tool!" The commander eyed the magic-user with a malign stare, and the fellow seemed to shrived before his gaze.

"I can go to the Euroz tribes, Elder Brother, and force them to come at once," Horval Crook-finger suggested.

The evil countenance of the one referred to as "Elder Brother" twisted into a large smile. "Yes, you can go. Tell our Cousins and Uncles with the tribes that they are to move with all speed to relieve this castle, for its loss opens the way to all the Pomarj. Then you will carry my report to the Oldest. . . . Understand?"

"Of course, Elder Brother."

"Then come with me to my chambers. I will write a message to accompany the rest." With that, the red-and-gold-clad man strode to the staircase that descended inside the massive keep tower. The magic-user followed.

Within minutes, the pair were back atop the high structure. Their associates had remained there, observing the assault. As the commander and his spell-casting underling arrived, a major escalade was being attempted on the southern bastion. Both observed for a moment.

"The fools have left off their attack upon the gate to gain the wall bastion there? This is heartening! Watch, Crook-finger, so you can tell this when you report," the red-robed commander ordered. Then, turning to the knot of others who stood anxiously by, he sent three of their number, lesser clerics of some sort, to bolster the defense of the wall.

Soon the men on top of the towering keep saw these three, with a platoon of men-at-arms, hurrying across the inner bailey's confines into the outer yard. Then they struggled a bit as they climbed the grassy swale that sloped up to the curving strongpoint on the outer wall. The bastion was a twenty-foot-high wall topped by a crenellated battlement. The wall was splayed at the bottom, serving as a batter to foil ram, pick, or screw and to confound attackers in tower or otherwise. For half of its height, the bastion's curve

was backed by packed earth. Along this ground, at man-height, and at intervals of about six feet, the thick wall was pierced with sloping embrasures, so that archer or crossbowman could loose his missiles at attacking men with almost total safety. From pierced merlon and embrasures between, as well as from the projecting parapet, the machicolation, missiles and rocks could be rained upon attackers. Defenders doing just that swarmed along the walkway atop die wall, which was as wide as a man is tall.

The escalade was simply an affair of mantlets, ladders, and rushing soldiers trying to protect themselves with shields as they rushed forward. One of the red-robed figures atop the tower waved his arms, and a small onager thrummed and bucked, its boulder sailing high over the bastion to fall somewhere on the other side. A splintering crash and screams indicated that it had scored a hit, and the commanders smiled evilly. The tops of ladders appeared, but the platoon of fresh troops just arrived were armed with military forks. They spread themselves along the curve of the wall and began tipping over ladders by pushing them away. Some of the mail-clad attackers did manage to clamber atop the battlement, but missile or sword cut down most of them. Few, indeed, got to the catwalk and began meleeing with the defenders there. Abruptly, one of the turrets along the bastion wall collapsed with a crash. Shouts indicated that some enemy had used magic to cause this. The commander was not worried. Both sides had spent most of their spells before dawn, and before another magical assault could strike, his own spell-casters would also be renewed in power.

"Enough!" bellowed the commander, turning toward the magic-user in his purple-black robe as if to appraise him once again before allowing him to go on so important a mission. "Alert the captains to bring their humanoid scum here immediately, then report to the Oldest. He will give you instructions thereafter."

Horval Crook-finger bowed deeply, muttered and gestured-for a moment, and suddenly he was a great rook whose plumage had a purplish sheen, and upon whose breast was a single scarlet feather.

"As you command, Elder," the bird croaked. Then, with a clumsy flapping, the raven took wing and flew in an upward spiral. The speck intermingled with a hundred others like it circling in the sky, carrion eaters hopeful of feasting soon. Again the commander smiled evilly, for he appreciated the transformation, the clever speech as a bird, and the

precaution of becoming one with the wheeling flock before flying to fulfill orders. The Elder Brother stood looking at the dark specks. Then, just as one soared southward and went out of sight high into the*blue heavens, a commotion from below broke his reverie.

"Find out what is going on - quickly!" he shouted to the group with him. All eight of the remaining men hastened to obey, leaving their master alone. The brazen clangor continued from below. Some dolt was hammering on the great alarm gong at the entrance to the massive keep building. Had some man-at-arms gone mad? There were certainly no enemies within the castle . . . yet! To reassure himself of this fact, the commander walked to the tower's battlement, stepped between two merlons, and peered downward. Soldiers in bloody hues, some bearing shields likewise flashing red, were converging on the low, twin towers that marked the entrance to the keep. They are only answering the alarm, the commander of the fortress thought to himself, but he hastened to go below himself to learn exactly what was occurring.

The staircase encircled the inside of the outer wall of the up-thrust tower that was the core of the castle's inner works. The one known only as Elder Brother sped down these steps, passing the upper floors without pause. Shouts, yells, and the clash of steel on steel urged him onward with even greater haste.

Something was certainly amiss, he thought to himself. Had one of die mercenary contingents rioted? Impossible, under the conditions. Internal revolt was always possible, too, but no ambitious member of the order with sufficient power and backing was within the stronghold; besides, the assault precluded such an attempted coup at this time - he would keep an eye on Lester, though, now that he considered the ambition that existed in others. What remained? Some dweomer to madden the guards? Impossible here. Somehow, the enemy must have broken in. ...

And then it came to him: the deserted dungeon! He had sent its inhabitants out in the abortive counter-stroke. That was no loss, save that they had failed to slay sufficient numbers of the foe - and possibly had allowed the enemy entrance to the complex underground places beneath the castle. Those stupid, brawling, snarling humanoids and their troll-fellows were troublesome, and he had been willing enough to see their slaughter, but at what price?

"To me!" the gold-and-crimson-robed commander yelled as he sped across the great hall. A handful of crossbowmen, weapons ready, were entering the echoing hall from its opposite side, where an archway led to the servant quarters and the kitchen complex. The mailed men-at-arms halted, raised their crossbows, and loosed a half-dozen quarrels at him.

Chapter 2

Gord came suddenly upon the scarlet-robed figure as it bent and slit the throat of a helplessly paralyzed soldier. The man had now killed five of his comrades, two near the middle of the hall and three more here before him.

Without hesitation, Gord sprang into attack, his sword darting into extended position and his dagger held ready for a follow-up thrust. His blade took the man under the arm, and the fellow gasped in surprise and pain as the shortsword struck home. The young thief almost immediately brought his long dagger into play, hooking it viciously around so that it too struck deep into the murderer's unsuspecting back. The scarlet robes were suddenly washed with a stain of darker red as the priest of evil fell to the floor, his life blood mingling with the coagulating pools spilled by his victims. Gord paused only a moment to wipe his two weapons clean, noting as he did so that the enemy priest had not gotten away without first taking wounds from the men he had so callously killed. Several shallow gashes and a protruding bolt showed that the crossbow-men had taken their toll before falling. Satisfied, the grim-faced young adventurer turned and sought other enemies still within the massive keep.

Their column had come into the place through the deserted warren of passages, cells, and chambers that lay beneath the stronghold. Strandkeep Castle, the place was called. One of the scores of fortresses that littered the Pomarj, Strandkeep was also one of the strongest, and it stood as a thorn between the Principality of Ulek to the west and the humanoid-infested territory that lay eastward. It was also the key to any invasion of the Pomarj. Dwarven miners had labored for weeks digging the tunnel that drove toward the castle, while the encircling army sought to destroy the place by more obvious means.

Strandkeep was well garrisoned and stocked with ample supplies, and had a surprising force of magic-users and clerics within. Men, machines of war, and even magic had not managed to seriously threaten Strandkeep during almost two months of siege. Word came that increasing numbers of humanoids, both ores and hobgoblins, were gathering in the Drachensgrab Hills to the north and to the east. Relief must soon come, as the encircling army could not withstand the attack of a horde of such creatures while maintaining its stranglehold on the fortress.

At the same time this bad news became known, the chief of the sappers reported to (he assembled commanders of the besieging army that his

miners were in position to enter the dungeons of Strandkeep Castle.

Intelligence had alerted them that these catacombs were used to house a large contingent of trolls, ogres, and the like - kept by the castle's master as a surprise weapon against attackers, and recently stocked full because of the advancing enemy. The time since had certainly caused supplies of food for these creatures to run low, and cannibalism must begin soon if the trolls and gnolls weren't released against their human adversaries outside Strandkeep. To give the evil master of the castle reason to do this, the great attack was staged. The escalade involved only about a thousand actual troops, plus some powerful illusions worked by the dweomercrafters of the attacking force, spell-binders schooled in this special art.

A reaction came as expected; the dungeons were emptied of their evil spawn, and the dwarven miners set to work to finish their labors. Within an hour their task was completed, and a force of men and dwarves poured down and through the long, low tunnel, spreading out under the works of the castle above, and proceeded to clear the subterranean complex of all resistance. A special contingent accompanied these soldiers, and Gord was a part of that smaller group.

Stout dwarf and man-at-arms could face their ilk, human or humanoid, with relative equality. The champions of the castle - the clerics, fighters, magic-users, and who knew what else - were a far different matter. Defeating such persons, as well as monstrous guardians possibly held in reserve too, would require heroes and those able to counter works of power. With the column of attackers came such persons, both dwarven and human. Gord, of course, was with them. His training in silence and stealth was paramount, not to mention his skill with weapons. He led a small band of dwarves and men, black-clad and fast moving. With them came a pair of spell-workers, too. While the lower area was cleared, this handful of warriors went above and secured the egress from the dungeons.

Once this was accomplished, reinforcements followed, and these troops were soon issuing from below and securing the ground floor of the great castle's massive keep. Meanwhile, Gord and his associates, along with others of the special force, began seeking their skillful counterparts within the castle. Thus, Gord had come upon the wicked commander of the fortress lost in his butchery, attacked, and slain him. Now he sought more such enemies, but did so with caution, however, for he knew that spell or sword could lay him low despite his own ability.

Fighting had progressed to the upper floors. A great melee still raged on the lower story, where the garrison fought to prevent the attackers from exiting the keep. Gord knew that the ring of besiegers had by now closed upon the entire circumference of Strandkeep Castle, forcing the defenders to make a choice. There were many soldiers in such a fortress, but not nearly enough to both protect the wall and contain the invaders already within the central structure of the stronghold. Soon, very soon, the place must fall.

Gord bounded up the wide main staircase. Bodies were everywhere, most of them dead defenders in their red surcoats, but not a few men and dwarves in other garb also. The second floor seemed to have been cleared, and Gord noted that archers and crossbow-armed dwarves were sniping from embrasures at the defenders below. He ran down a long hallway that led toward the tower at the core of the complex. Ahead, several of the invading men-at-arms were struggling with a makeshift battering ram, trying to beat down the door leading to the tower. A gray-robed magician who had just joined the men motioned them aside. The bronze wood door would yield easily to her She cast her dweomer and the portal flew open, its bar magically lifted and dropped away.

The spell-caster moved back from the suddenly opened door quickly, but not quickly enough. A spear hurled from within the tower took her full in the shoulder. Its possessor must have lain in wait for the opportunity to occur, and she had no chance to avoid the weapon.

As the wounded magician reeled and fell, Gord leaped and rolled into the area beyond the portal. Another spear came at him as he did so, but his acrobatics foiled the attack, and the weapon clanged on the stone flags near him, skittering across the floor. He saw that its head was coated with a greenish paste: poison! These were foul opponents indeed. Gord recovered and crouched, sword and dagger on guard, back to the wall. Before him were a pair of tall, crimson- and black-garbed men. They appeared to be twins, almost, each with curly hair, pale, ice-blue eyes, and thin-featured, arrogant faces that suited their slender build and confident carriage. The men-at-arms came rushing into the chamber, and one of these tall men moved gracefully to prevent the soldiers from passing him. Gord had time only to see the fellow sneer as he batted two speeding quarrels away with his bare hands, just as the missiles streaked toward his chest. Then the other of the pair came at Gord.

The speed of his attack was incredible. Gord had time only to attempt to fend off the spinning, bare-handed foe. Gord thought himself successful, as the fellow moved away from his threatening blades, but then Gord was struck by a kick that drove him against the stone wall and nearly left him breathless. Gord responded with a fast backhand cut with his shortsword, but the man's leg was already elsewhere, and the counterstroke cut only air.

"Not fast enough, thief!" the crimson-robed opponent said, posturing strangely before Gord. "I shall give you a lesson in true fighting skills before I kill you. . . . Watch now."

With this, the man's hands began to flutter, his arms moved sinuously, and his feet stepped in a complex dance-like movement. Gord, fortunately for him, was too battle-wise to be fooled by such motions. He watched his opponent's eyes - when he could. The fellow actually turned his back, or looked away too often, for Gord to be able to lock his gaze on that of his adversary. Something in those eyes, or a tension displayed in neck or body, alerted Gord, and he was ready when the exotic posturing suddenly turned into a furious assault. Gord was struck again, this time by an iron-hard hand and a powerful kick, but in return he dealt the fellow a long gash with his sword and a deep wound with his dagger.

"Perhaps you might gain instruction in swordplay," Gord mocked despite a bleeding mouth, blades moving slowly before him in his own complex rhythm of fighting.

The pale features of the robed man's face went nearly white at this. "Save your breath, you inferior mongrel!" he snarled. "I don't wish you to be too winded to scream when I give you a painful death!"

"It is you who keep on squeaking, white rat. Do you bite too?" Gord egged the man on, for this contest must be finished soon. The soldiers were not faring well against his near-twin. Two were down and still, and a third dropped even as Gord spoke. Their lone opponent seemed unhurt. Gord knew that he would never be able to defeat both of these formidable, weaponless fighters, so he had to finish with the one before him quickly.

Amazingly, the wounds he had given this man had ceased much of their bleeding, almost as if he were a troll. The bastard had used the opportunity of insult exchange to somehow partially heal himself, Gord realized. The process required some concentration, though, and Gord acted on the assumption that his foe was distracted. His assumption proved true, and despite the fellow's superior speed, Gord was successful in his onslaught,

scoring another pair of wounds and avoiding the flurry of hands and feet that countered his attack.

A lightninglike series of exchanges followed, with slight pauses between series, where Gord taunted and jibed, and his adversary made strange noises and grimaces. Both men were hurt - Gord battered and bruised, and the blond, weaponless opponent slashed and stabbed. Who was getting the better of it, Gord could not guess, for he had never faced such an opponent before.

The fighting between men-at-arms and the pale, lean twin to Gord's foeman had devolved to a contest between two surviving soldiers and their now-cautious opponent. Out of the corner of his eye, Gord saw that this unarmed fighter was also showing signs of having been hurt. Evidently, the two survivors of the group were more skilled than their comrades had been. They tried to work to either flank of the tall, red-clad enemy as he moved and struck, keeping them at bay.

Gord must have seemed not to have been alert as he quickly appraised what was happening to his fellows, for the blue-eyed foeman launched an incautious rush that not only missed its mark but enabled Gord to deliver a vicious set of counterattacks. Two of the Wows were mere scratches, but the other pair were serious strokes that caused much harm. Seconds later, the fighter struck Gord a buffet that nearly knocked him unconscious, but missed with his follow-up attack, and again took painful wounds in return.

After another such exchange, the man sought to escape the contest, for he must have sensed that it could now end but one way. But as he flipped backward and began his dash for safety, Gord launched his long dagger squarely at his back. True to his aim, the sharp point and steely shank bit deep. The legs still sought to carry the enemy's body forward even as the trunk collapsed and went sprawling to the floor.

Without bothering to find out if the man was actually dead or simply wounded and stunned, Gord wheeled to his right. Only one hard-pressed soldier still faced the other red-clothed member of the castle's evil garrison. Both were caught up in their own life-and-death struggle, enabling Gord to get a shortsword thrust home before the foe realized that he was again beset by more than one adversary.

The sting of the wound Gord inflicted seemed to cause the man to leap sideways; actually, this was a tactic to get himself clear of the area from which the attack came and give himself some time to assess the new

situation. The soldier, however, was ready for the ploy, and his short-hafted axe flew from his hand to strike the fellow even as he took the new position.

Caught unawares, the enemy warrior was unable to dodge or deflect the tumbling axe, and its blade caught him on his arm. As the man sought to pull free the buried bit, Gord somersaulted into him and bowled the man over, then began repeatedly pummeling with the hilt of his sword and stabbing with the short-bladed knife he had drawn from his boot.

"Leave off, mate. . . . The bugger's dead," the panting man-at-arms said softly. Gord ceased his flurry, realizing that the soldier was right.

"What about the other one?" the fighter asked. "He get away?"

A glance showed Gord that the body of his first foe was no longer where it had fallen, but a bloody trail showed where the man had gone. The dagger was nowhere in sight - Gord's prized poniard was gone, too!

"After the dog, man!" ordered Gord. "We must find him before he hides away in some nook or cranny of this warren and escapes!"

"Yessir!" the soldier snapped in reply without thinking. This man in black leather was obviously a leader, and the sergeant obeyed him without question. The soldier set off immediately, first trotting to where the train of darkening blood began and then slowing as he followed it through a columned archway leading from the hall. Gord was at his heels.

The telltale stains led to an arras. The hanging curtain of embroidered wool hid a narrow passage beyond. The soldier again broke into a lope, moving several paces ahead of Gord, but he had taken no more than a few steps before a shout of pain came from between his clenched teeth. He raised his left foot, grabbing for the injured member, but as he did so he groaned and crashed to the stone-flagged floor, dead. Gord halted instantly, assessing what had happened. By careful scrutiny he discerned small objects littering the dim passageway floor. Poisoned caltrops . . . the wounded man must have strewn them behind, knowing that pursuers would be unlikely to see them until too late. Gord leaped over the area where the small, sharp-pronged things were scattered. He bounded up a narrow spiral stairway, moving fast but keeping track of the splashes of red. The trail did not continue up past a small landing.

Without hesitation, Gord began a careful examination of the wall to his right. There were traces of blood near it, and he assumed that a hidden door

was to be found here. Within a minute he had indeed located a secret stone panel. It was not difficult to release its catch and open it.

The narrow corridor beyond was dark, unlighted save for the faint illumination from the stairs, where an embrasure somewhere above let sunlight filter down. No matter; Gord's vision was not dependent on such light, for he held his dweomered sword, which magically empowered his eyes to see the parts of the spectrum above and below the human norm. Ducking his head, Gord dived into the passageway, his body rolled into a ball that tumbled ahead in a series of fast rolls. The tall, blond man he had been tracking waited within the corridor, holding a crossbow aimed at the rectangle of light revealed by the opening of the secret door.

The thick bolt buzzed harmlessly over Gord's compact rush, clattering into the stairwell beyond. As it did so, Gord sprang to his feet and attacked the wounded man before he could reload the weapon. The red-gowned foe had thought Gord unable to see him lying in ambush in the darkness, and expected to slay Gord thus. With a terrible curse, the man hurled the useless crossbow in Gord's general direction, turned, and fled groaning down the black corridor. He managed to pull open a small, wooden door at its end, but that was all. Gord struck his back with his shoulder, a slamming blow that drove the wounded man into the room beyond and sent him sprawling to the floor, face down.

"Quarter!" the fallen man managed to cry through his bloody lips. "Spare me, and I'll give you a king's ransom!"

Gord pressed his sword point firmly against the prone man's back. "If you move other than to speak, I'll kill you as I would a spider." The hard finality of Gord's voice made the man freeze motionless. "Tell me of your offer - quickly!"

"Do you pledge you'll spare me if I do so?"

"Poisoner! Foul assassin! Lurker in ambush! You dare to plead with me thus? Prepare your spirit for the foul lower planes where demons or devils await with gleeful anticipation!"

"No! Wait. ... I will show you the treasure, wealth and more! There are plans that your superiors will find most interesting, and you will gain promotion and favor. Surely for such , you will not slay me! I'll be your willing slave, just give me my life."

Gord was disgusted by the man's begging, at his suggestion of intrigue and scheming on Gord's part, and his willing acquiescence to bondage for

life. "Silence! Speak again before I tell you, and I'll sever your spine - if you have one. Answer truthfully and exactly: Where is this hoard you yammer of kept?"

"Here, in this very room," the wounded foeman said without inflection. "This is the secret chamber of the Elder Brother."

"Who is this Elder Brother?"

"Our . . . the . . . commander of this castle."

Gord leaned gently on his sword, making the man gasp and squirm slightly. "You said 'our.' What is 'our'? And what profession does this Elder Brother have other than being castellan?"

"Our Order holds this fortress, and Elder Brother is a High Priest of Tharizdun, thus high within our Order. . . ." At this pause Gord gave another easy prod, and the prone man hastily added, "The Order is called the Scarlet Brotherhood."

Gord had heard vague stories about the Scarlet Brotherhood, and he mentally filed the information away for later contemplation. "Tell me where the treasure is kept," he barked.

"There is a hidden place, and envenomed darts. Allow me to light candles, and I will show you."

Although he needed no such illumination, Gord permitted the wounded man to rise. The man fumbled in his belt and drew forth a tinderbox. Gord watched carefully, but the fellow appeared to have no thought of trickery or further resistance. He had accepted the situation, and now sought only to obey. Puffing the sparks into a tiny flame, the prisoner took a small taper and caught its wick afire. In a moment a great candelabrum shed the light of three massive candles over the small apartment. Gord could see another secret door, probably leading to a chamber beyond in which the so-called Elder Brother dwelled. The room he was in had little in it besides the candle stand, a small desk and chair, and a wooden chest of no great size.

"Here," the wounded prisoner said, pointing to a cabinet that Gord had overlooked. "I must open this with care, pressing hard on the side panel, else the darts will be loosed upon me when the door is swung outward."

Moving quickly to avoid any possible discharge of such missiles, Gord observed as the fellow opened the cupboard, shortsword aimed to thrust home at the slightest sign of trickery. The space revealed had several shelves. Upon these boards rested a variety of items - scrolls, loose parchment sheets, an array of small containers, and several leather bags.

"Gold!" the fellow said with an obsequious smile, as he picked up a heavy bag. Its contents shifted and clinked. "Platinum plates," he said, patting another, "and this one holds electrum - all these on the lower shelf do."

"The rest?" Gord demanded.

"The flat box here holds a store of precious stones used for bribery. The pots and jars are those things common to priestly powers - the stuff for spell-working. The scrolls are sacred writings of Tharizdun. The other papers are orders and plans . . . the important documents I told you of ... which will bring you much favor with your masters when you hand them the intelligence!"

Without comment, Gord proceeded to take the gems and platinum. This treasure was his by right of conquest and discovery. The remaining wealth he left for the others of his allies. He ordered his captive to carry the scrolls and loose sheets of parchment, and the two returned the way they had come. It was time for Gord to find his friend, Gellor, and report this unsuspected success.

Chapter 3

The last of the prisoners were being marched from Strandkeep as files of dwarves and men wearing the colors of the Prince of Ulek entered the castle to garrison the captured stronghold. The short, broad dwarven soldiery bore the red axe on a white field upon their tabards, while their human counterparts displayed the gold and purple of the Prince's quartered arms, signifying them to be his veteran contingents.

Not all would remain here, of course, for with the fortress in his hands, Prince Olinstaad Corond would certainty advance upon Stoneheim to take that city and gain access to the rich mines to the north of it. There, in the mountainous portion of the Drachensgrab Hills called Wormsjaws, gold and gems were wrested from the stony interiors of many deep mines. His Serene Highness of Ulek desired to regain this wealth, so long lost to his realm.

Now that the way had been unlocked, and Strandkeep made secure as a base of operations, the dwarven prince was likely to attain his desired goal. His army was pressing the disorganized humanoid tribes of the Pomarj eastward, while a force of men from allied petty states of the region called the Wild Coast sought revenge upon these same tribes themselves. Although this motley conglomerate of troops was of questionable effectiveness, their presence far to the north, menacing the town of Highport, certainly split the defender's strength. Ulek could hope to seize and hold a strip of the Pomarj from the Jewel River to Stoneheim, fortifying the northern border of this territory with dwarven-built towers within the Drachensgrabs to the peaks of Wormsjaws.

Some of the mercenary companies that had assisted in the taking of the great castle were now being paid off. Others would be signed on as needed, and such sell-swords were easily enlisted in this part of the Flanaess. No major battle would be fought for many weeks, for the fall of Strandkeep dealt the rulers of the Pomarj a severe blow. They would fall back, regroup, and plan some strategy to recoup.

Among the bodies of mercenaries that were fanning outward from the castle, heading west and north, was a company of riders who bore no special insignia. This group of a hundred or so struck due north, heading into the heart of the Drachensgrab Hills, evidently fearing nothing that might molest them in that wilderness. At the head of the assemblage rode Gord, the druid known as Curley Greenleaf, and a grizzled man called Gellor.

"When we reach the Suss," the burly druid was saying, referring to a great band of forest to the north, "I will carry intelligence to all those who must know."

"Excellent, my friend!" the one-eyed Gellor said approvingly. "Gord and I will take the company on to Badwall, avoiding any contact with the host of petty nobles gathered under Elredd's banner to war on Highport. Some of our comrades will undoubtedly wish to sell their lances to Elredd, but we will have some force awaiting in Badwall-town when you return."

"I still say we should take our chinkers," Gord interjected with a shaking of his fat purse for emphasis, "and leave the rest of this dangerous business to others. After all, we have risked our lives aplenty during the last months, and we should be allowed to enjoy the spoils of victory . . . until the money runs out. Time enough for adventure then!"

Gellor shook his head in mock dismay, while the druid made disapproving clucks on the other hand. "Gord, Gord, will I ever be able to rehabilitate you? Leave your past thievery behind and think as a dedicated agent of those who fight Evil! We must put duty before our personal safety, let alone pleasure, always."

Despite the jesting tone, Gord knew that Gellor meant what he said. The grizzled, one-eyed bard was indeed a devoted agent serving those who sought to prevent the spread of malign powers throughout the whole of Oerth. He had met the one-eyed man, then posing as a mere thief, long ago in the Bandit Kingdoms; adventured and fought by his side in the far-off lands to the east; and probably owed his life to him.

"Leave off, Gellor, you one-eyed conscience!" Gord retorted. "I protest this entire quest, but I am resigned to it - else your nagging will drive me as insane as a rune of madness!"

Greenleaf and Gellor laughed, slapped him on the back in comradely approval, and then fell on to their discussion again. This allowed Gord time to reflect on what had led him to the current pass. . . .

Orphan, beggar, and thief he had been in his childhood, an urchin in the slums of Greyhawk's Old City, then a prisoner indentured to the Beggarmaster Theobald. Seeking his fortune in the wide world beyond the city had brought him experience and skill that enabled him not only to survive but to prosper. Accomplished as a fighter with sword and dagger since his early training in Greyhawk, Gord had used his weapons all too often in the course of his wandering adventures, but he didn't really regret

this. Coupled with his skill in the art of acrobatics, thievery had brought him many a fortune - which he lost with much the same ease.

Gord had loved and lost. That was life. His friends - Gellor, Curley Greenleaf, and the hulking barbarian Chert - were true friends and boon companions. Gellor had rescued him from jeopardy when Gord had been imprisoned by his lover's angry father, Count Blemu. Then, along with Curley Greenleaf and Chert, they had survived encounters with predatory monsters and pitched battles too.

He and Chert had eventually come to Cord's home, Greyhawk City, years after Gord had left that place for the first time as a mere stripling. A great fortune in precious gems, part of a prize they had wrested from a frightful demon, was soon converted into coin of the realm - silver nobles, electrum luckies, gold orbs, and platinum plates. Then, for nearly six months, the two young men had lived high.

Chert quickly learned to enjoy the fine life that an unlimited supply of money bought in the city. He wore fine clothes, drank the best of potables, and dined sumptuously. Gord had experienced a brief taste of such living when, as a young, enterprising thief, he would masquerade as a noble wastrel or the son of a rich merchant. Now, he and Chert rented their own villa in Greyhawk's Garden Quarter, gave parties, and were entertained by courtesans. Now? No, that was wrong. Next. That led to rapid depletion of even a treasury as great as the two had, and all too soon the funds were squandered.

The barbarian was growing tired of gaming, wenching, and foppery anyway. Born and bred in the wilderness, Chert was at first awed, then fascinated, by the delights and soft living offered by so sophisticated a city as Greyhawk. All of that paled quickly. The barbarian chafed at inaction and ease, seeking excitement and adventure. Occasional hunts beyond the city walls, even frequent brawls in some rowdy tavern along Greyhawk's notorious Strip, became boring to him. Chert had readily agreed to accompany Gord when the young thief had suggested that they augment their dwindling reserves by relieving the rich of excess wealth.

There was no question that the barbarian was quick and climbed like a cat, but in the urban surroundings his natural skills were otherwise useless, and he stood out far too much. Often, Gord's carefully laid plans were brought to naught by some noise Chert made, his all-too-ready approach to fighting, or simply the fact that he was too large to go where Gord could.

This led to mutual frustration and quarreling. They gave up their expensive villa and took lodging in a small inn located in the Foreign Quarter.

Shortly thereafter, Chert announced his intention of joining a caravan bound for Dyvers, stating that as one of its mercenary guards he would be able to escape suffocation in the crowded city and perhaps have a bit of adventure too. Argument was useless, even reminding the barbarian that they awaited both reward and news from Curley Greenleaf did not sway his resolve. They had clasped hands in friendship, pledging to meet again soon, and then Chert had gathered the few belongings he cared about, taken his great axe, Brool, and departed. Gord recalled that he thought Chert looked happy for the first time in months then.

Actually, Gord had agreed with his barbarian friend about the likelihood of Curley Greenleaf ever coming back. When the druid had left them to carry back the strange relic taken from the lair of the slain cataboligne demon, Greenleaf had assured both young men that he would send money and news of the meaning of the prize. Not that either actually needed further reward - the gemstones the druid had given them were a fabulous treasure, but it was not like Greenleaf not to live up to his word. Six months of silence led both Gord and Chert to surmise that some ill fate had befallen their companion, or that the eldritch nature of his burden was such that no reward nor information could be sent.

With his last remaining friend gone, the young thief looked at Greyhawk from a new perspective. After leaving word with several ostlers to be on the lookout for the druid, and explaining that he would check back periodically to renew their stipend for doing this service, Gord moved his quarters to the Low Quarter, accumulated disguises, and set about rebuilding a career.

Soon the thief known only as Blackcat became the talk of the city. Rare glimpses enabled a few to state that this burglar was black of skin and garb, fast as a cat, and as agile too. Some speculated that the cat burglar was a drow, one of the dark elvenfolk of subterranean places. Others said that such a thief could not be human or demi-human at all, but some spawn of supernatural sort entirely.

Blackcat confounded guards, foiled traps, laughed at locks, and eluded all pursuit. Searches and spies could find nothing. Informants had no news to sell to the masters of the city or to their police. Even the Thieves' Guild was mystified, and chagrined, by the success of this daring unknown. The identity of Blackcat became a subject for conversation from the lowest

slums to the grand halls of the Lord Mayor's residence. He was, of course, none other than Gord.

Remaining anonymous was out of the question. Gord resumed his role of gambler and thief openly. Eventually, he was recognized by his old companion, San. The boy had grown into manhood and was now a master of high station in the guild and married to the daughter of the aging Guildmaster, Arentol. It was likely, in fact, that San would soon be elected to the exalted office held by his father-in-law.

Neither San nor the old Guildmaster was interested in unearthing past grudges. The skeletons revealed would be bad for son-in-law and embarrassing to Guildmaster. Having such open presence in Greyhawk, Gord was watched with great suspicion for a time, but his activity was judged harmless enough. Where he had gained his fortune was unknown, but it was easy enough to discover that Gord had returned to the city months previously, complete with untold riches and a brawny companion. The latter had recently departed Grey-hawk for parts unknown, but Gord still remained to enjoy his wealth.

He was not a registered thief, but Gord mainly gambled and bet upon sports and like things, doing well enough with such wagering, although hardly in need of the proceeds. The young adventurer sported jewelry and fine clothes that indicated no need for burglaries such as those Blackcat performed. Besides, Cord's skills were known to the guild, which had estimated him a master in his own right - rating disguise, stealth, and lock-picking excellent; pocket-picking, purse-slitting, and sleight of hand superb; and impersonation and confidence schemes masterful. San suggested that he himself, even as inferior to his father-in-law as he was, was certainly a better thief than Gord would ever be. So the members of the guild looked elsewhere in their efforts to discover and end the career of the cat-burglar who was near to destroying their repute in Greyhawk.

Actually, Gord had little to show for his daring exploits at crime. While risking life and limb in feats of balance and gymnastic prowess needed to accomplish his midnight burglaries, Gord gained hardly enough to maintain his high-living style. Victims always claimed their loss from his work to be far more than the young thief actually took from strongbox or secret cache. True, he had a small store of jewelry he dared not fence, a few great pieces carefully kept in the old wooden box that was the only possession he had

from his childhood. Otherwise, though, the gold spent in a night's carouse was nearly always a tithe of Gord's total fortune.

He debated changing his habits, even thought seriously of going westward after Chert and seeking adventure in other places, but for whatever reason he stayed and lived his dual existence without alteration. It was, all in all, as exciting and dangerous as could be hoped for. The glamor had faded, the pleasures gained were tarnishing, but there was something keeping him going that Gord could not himself understand. Perhaps dissatisfaction was engendering a death wish.

Gord nearly ceased his periodic inquiries as to Curley Greenleafs possible presence in the city. One day, months later, and on a whim brought on by boredom, he casually entered the Green Dragon Inn. It was a place frequented by foreigners, mercenaries, tough adventurers, and others of less savory aspect. Even as he sought the proprietor to ask if he had news of a druid, he saw the rotund fellow in person. Greenleaf was unmistakable in nearly any crowd - a pudgy, bald-headed half-elf with slightly pointed ears showing his heritage, and clad in druidical garments. The druid did not immediately recognize Gord, however, for his former associate had changed. Dressed in elegant fashion, hair worn in the length currently vogue in the city, and not presently beardless, the young man he saw enter could have been any of hundreds of rakes and other gentry common to Greyhawk.

It took only a moment for Gord to realize this fact, and he thought a good joke to be in order. Floppy hat pulled low and set at roguish angle, gait swaggering, he came to the druid's table and purposely bumped it so as to spill the flagon of dark ale set before its occupant. Greenleaf uttered a most unclerical sounding oath and leaped to his feet, ready to teach the perpetrator of such an offense some manners. The bald man glared angrily at the smirking fop before him for a full second before he finally saw it was none other than his young friend, Gord, playing tricks.

After much exchange of greetings and appropriate toasts, the pair staggered joyfully back to Gord's apartment above a small shop in a better neighborhood of the Low Quarter. Eventually they sobered sufficiently to find supper in a nearby public eating house, return to Gord's quarters once again, and exchange tales of what had happened since their last meeting. Despite Cord's protests, Curley insisted that Gord recount his tale first.

Curley was sorry to learn of the barbarian warrior's departure. He clucked reprovingly at Cord's exploits as Blackcat. He hardly glanced at the splendid items of jewelry Gord revealed for his perusal, although the druid did remark on the splendid old box they were in, urging Gord to have it restored. At last it was Greenleafs turn.

The druid related an uneventful and rapid return to the Celadon Forest, the dwelling place of the Great Druid from whom Curley Greenleaf sought counsel. The workings of the strange relic were as mysterious to that personage as they were to his lesser fellow, so the two had eventually gone to the Grand Druid himself. The result was still unsatisfactory, so nothing would do but for all three to seek the assistance of certain Hierophants, an arcane order of druidical priests, which Curley knew but little about. Much was learned thereby.

What the relic actually was, of what nature and origin, who placed it in its underground repository and guarded it with a demon, and the true powers it held Greenleaf refused to enumerate. Perhaps he was himself ignorant. In any event, all the stocky fellow would tell his young friend related to but a single dweomer of the relic - the object could be used to discover events elsewhere and elsewhen, including many other planes of existence, dimensions, and probabilities. It was thus empowered, Greenleaf related, to serve as a counterbalance to another ancient object, an artifact of blackest Evil.

Much more had occurred regarding the strange object before Curley - now given status as Druid, a ranking number of the druidical hierarchy - gained permission to contact his long-separated companions. Thus, he had explained to Gord, a year had slipped away before he was able to come bearing the rewards he had promised for their part in recovering the lost relic.

From his bundle Greenleaf brought forth a long, extraordinarily thin cloak of gray with soft boots to match. These, Gord learned, were of elfin make and bestowed near-invisibility and almost perfect silence to their wearer. Curley also had magical wrist-guards for the massive barbarian; Chert had often expressed contempt for armor and similar protection, so the druids had thought that such bracers would be most appreciated.

Restoring the latter items to his pack, Greenleaf had then asked for the young thief's further assistance. Gord had surprised himself by jumping at the opportunity to find adventure and purpose. He agreed before even

asking as to the nature of his friend's mission and needs. The druid seemed somewhat surprised at such ready acquiescence himself, and briefly related the circumstances of the affair to Gord.

Gellor, the veteran agent and spy, participant in many deeds of derring-do and countless skirmishes and battles, was involved! The bard had left off his endless missions for this or that sovereign head of state, abandoned his watch on the Bandit Kingdoms, Aerdy, and all the rest. He had come instantly to the summons of the Cabal.

By the time Curley came from his conclave with the Hierophants, Gellor was already an integral part of the enterprise. He and Greenleaf had sped westward, and even as the druid was speaking with Gord, the one-eyed adventurer was gathering a force of like folk and mercenary soldiers below the city - working his way down the Wild Coast, bound for the Drachensgrab Hills. Would Gord help the effort by lending his skills and fighting abilities?

The force Gellor was raising was to assist the Prince of Ulek in his effort to take Strandkeep Castle and make war upon the men and humanoids of the Pomarj. Of course, Gord was ready, being more interested than ever in the undertaking. The young thief was clever enough to know that there was more to this than a simple military campaign, no matter the worth of that fight. Greenleaf had refused to speak of any other purpose save joining with the dwarven monarch, and this whetted Gord's appetite for the whole business still more! Next day, the pair had quitted the walls of Greyhawk for the countryside and the long journey southward for the Pomarj. Thus had Gord come to the shores of the Azure Sea, helped to take the great fortress of Strandkeep, and dispatched many of its evil garrison, men-at-arms and their masters alike. . . .

"I said, a brass bit for your thoughts!" Gellor nearly shouted in his ear.

Gord snapped out of his reverie, and blinked rather foolishly at the hard-featured bard. "I was reflecting on the past. . . . Sorry."

"You might have no future unless you use your senses," the man replied sarcastically. "Keep the blank expression, and don't look around - keep your eyes on me." Still smiling, Gellor added, "There are at least a score of verbeeg to our rear. I've seen them several times now. Those blasters can run, you know, and they're in a crescent formation behind us. I'd say that they want us to keep moving ahead . . . into whatever ambuscade their fellows are preparing for us somewhere close ahead!"

Gord wanted to turn and see if he could spot the following verbeeg. He had heard of these giant-sized men, creatures eight or nine feet tall, often gross and deformed, and as mean as they were ugly. He had never actually seen one, for as fierce as verbeeg were, they were hunted by men - an act of self-preservation, of course, for if given opportunity the verbeeg would rape, plunder and destroy the communities of their smaller cousins. In these hills it was not unexpected that such creatures would be found, dwelling in relative harmony with humanoid beasts and savage ogres and giants, as likely as not.

Gord looked quizzically at Gellor. "What are we going to do?" he asked in a low tone.

"Curley, tell that horse of yours to pull up as if he were lame," the one-eyed bard told his other companion. "Be quick!"

Soon Greenleaf was bending forward in his high-backed saddle. He patted the steed's neck, but no distant onlooker would have noticed anything else. Suddenly, the big stallion began moving in an odd gait, limping and favoring its right foreleg, as if some stone had bruised its iron-shod hoof.

"How's that?" the druid asked Gellor.

In reply, the one-eyed adventurer raised his hand, turned in his saddle, and called the column of men to a halt. "Rest!" he called. "Greenleaf s mount is lame. I'll explain what we will do." As he shouted all this, he turned his own courser slowly, riding back to the various and sundry lieutenants and minor spell-workers who rode near the head of the column. After a brief conversation there, these men rode back along the column of lancers and mounted sergeants with crossbows, all the way to the handful of officers and tough adventurers who guarded the company's rear.

The four files of" riders quickly split into two halves, one spreading out casually to the left, the other to the right, while the tail of the column moved forward. This maneuver was not done with seeming precision; horses were reined only loosely, heads low, and allowed to graze. There was certainly a plan behind it, however, and Gord noted that the animals' movements were quietly guided by knees and heels. Everyone seemed quite relaxed, though, even as the former column suddenly shaped itself into a line, two ranks deep, lancers to the rear, crossbowmen and the rest in front.

"What is Gellor doing?" the puzzled young thief asked his friend. "Why are we forming for a charge with our lancers behind? And what reason to charge ahead into some undiscovered ambush?"

"Don't be a noddy peak, my lad! Old Gellor may have only one real eye, but his brain and wits more than make up for it," Curley said bluffly. "Now you pay attention to him and be ready for a rapid change!"

Almost as if that were a cue, the grizzled adventurer suddenly brought forth his longsword and gave it a wave. Without any further orders, the two long lines suddenly wheeled to face to the rear. Now lieutenants barked orders, and as the horsemen began advancing in the direction from which they had come, mounts moving at a slow walk. A slight shift of the rear rank brought the crossbow-armed riders into the intervals between the lancers, and from there they could loose their bolts without fear of hitting their fellows. Greenleaf and Gord were at the center, a sort of third rank, along with Gellor and a pair of veteran mercenary lieutenants. Like groups had taken station on either wing, obviously meant to guard the flanks of the formation.

"Charge!" cried Gellor in a stentorian voice that could have been heard a quarter-mile distant.

The walking horses began to trot, then quickened their gait to a canter. The ground was too uneven for a full gallop, and even a charge such as this was not likely to prove as devastating as one normally would. Nonetheless, Gord was glad he was not standing before the thundering lancers and sergeants of the company as they moved thus.

Without warning, huge men sprang up from behind bushes and other cover that Gord would never have supposed would hide such tall savages. The verbeeg were clad in an odd assortment of armors. Some had fur hides and pelts, others scraps of armor attached to hide coats. Byrnies taken from who knew where were crudely converted into jacks to protect the upper bodies of these lean giants. Some bore shields of human make, others crude ones obviously fashioned by their own hands. Each bore an equally motley assortment of weapons. Most carried crude clubs and rough spears. A few had like weapons of somewhat superior craftsmanship. Here and there were pole arms and great swords recognizable as having once belonged to men. Bardiche and massive, two-handed mace were held with one-handed nonchalance by these behemoths.

Into this suddenly revealed force the horsemen charged without hesitation. A flurry of bolts was sent speeding toward the verbeeg savages, just as the lancers in the front rank lowered their flame-pennoned weapons. The light crossbows carried by the men of the second line were quickly

slung on pommels, so that the sergeants could ply other arms in the coming melee - sword, axe, or whatever weapon the soldier chose. Then the charging horsemen struck their enemies with a crash of steel on steel. Not a few of the leading riders, or their steeds, had been brought down by the heavy spears that the human-giants hurled at the closing horsemen. Undaunted, the charge went home, and the lances' impacts tumbled verbeeg and riders too. Maddened stallions bit and sent vicious kicks with skull-crushing force as they reared and came down. Helmets spun through the air, as did severed heads and broken weapons. Sobering blows and vicious thrusts then fell upon those of the human giants who still stood, as the second wave of riders fell upon them. A half-dozen of their most savage members still stood and fought, with bloody bardiche hacking or two-handed sword slashing death, but a score of their fellows lay dead in a matter of minutes.

A rapid check to left and right showed Gord that the flanks were secured. The expert fighting men and lesser magic-users there worked in conjunction to destroy the few towering verbeeg coming at the meleeing company thus. Gellor had been singing a heroic chant ever since the charge began, his voice somehow carrying above the thundering hooves and the din of battle afterward. The druid was also engaged in activity, moving toward the rear to watch for the expected coming of fresh foes, brought from hiding by the shouts and sounds of the struggle. Evidently Greenleaf thought the threat was serious, for two associated druids, the chief magician of the company, and a swarthy Chakyik, a slant-eyed, bandy-legged fighter of great prowess, renowned for his terrible horn bow, went with him as he retraced the route over which the company had just passed.

Virtually left alone, the young adventurer looked for the most likely place where his swordsmanship might be of use. A heavily armored verbeeg, laying bloody bodies in dismembered rows about him, was nearby. This fellow seemed to be inspiring the few remaining giants to rally, and Gord was disconcerted to see that a few more of the monsters were yet uncommitted, hanging back to see if they should fight or flee.

Setting his heels sharply into his warhorse's flanks, Gord rode to attack the giant, his blade held spearlike before him, aiming his course so as to sweep past the verbeeg chieftain and allow the point to drive home. Too busy fending off thrust lances and flashing blades to take the additional

threat of a single horseman seriously, the human giant was an easy target for a sword as keen, and an aim as artful, as Gord's.

The impact of delivering the blow spun the young thief sideways, and he almost fell from his seat atop the courser. Only the high cantle of the saddle saved him. The verbeeg was reeling, Gord's sword imbedded in his side but still somehow managing to fight the men before him. Without thinking, Gord vaulted from his steed's back, ran toward the giant, and sprang through the air, leaping high and driving his long, enchanted dagger through the steel plate that protected the chieftain's huge back. The verbeeg gave an awful, bull-like bellow at the attack, then fell dead, for the dagger had struck him a mortal wound.

The skulking remainder of the band was sent flying by well-shot quarrels, and the whole affair was done. Over a score of the company was dead, or soon would die of wounds, and as many were injured. Explosive sounds, deep shouts of giant voices, and then more bangs and crackles sounded from beyond a hill that they would have passed over had the squadrons ridden on unaware of the ambush.

Gord had regained his wits and his sword, found his horse, and remounted. He peered at the hill. Brilliant silvery light sprang up and died as quickly, then a rainbow of jarringly wrong colors shot into the air. An arcing boulder made a momentary appearance in its flight, then fell from vision. More boulders appeared similarly, and their impact could be felt from where Gord watched, as the sound of their crashing and shattering could be heard. With that, the air above the source of these flying stones seemed to become red hot, actually turning a maroon color and shimmering, while waves of tawny flame undulated in it as eels swim in water. Bellowing and titanic howls arose, but no boulders did so.

A full minute elapsed with nothing more. The company was gathering its wounded, readying the horses, stripping (he dead of anything that they, still living, might use. Over the crest of the intervening hill came Curley Greenleaf and his henchmen, riding like the wind although no enemy pursued them.

Gellor galloped his horse pan way out to meet the group. "What happened, Greenleaf, my old friend?" he called as the handful of men brought their horses to a skidding stop. "Are you chased by invisible stalkers and fiends of the ether?"

"Don't attempt poor jests now!" the sweating druid called back. "There must be a hundred hill giants, verbeeg, and ogres back there. We gave them hell, but a couple of bigger ones - probably mountain giants - began tossing rocks at us. We hit them with a lick or two of magic, and that stirred up a hornets' nest. I'd say that there are a dozen of those big bastards back there with the rest."

"What do you think they'll do?" Gellor asked in a worried tone.

"Come boiling after us in a minute!" cried the druid. "Even though we did for a bunch of them, there's more than enough left to do the same for all of us!"

"Then we make a fast detour to the west," the one-eyed man said laconically. He waved to the surviving members of the company to follow, and then trotted his horse to the left, angling slightly southward and bringing the animal to a faster pace as he reached the head of the column that had formed. Gord, Greenleaf, and the rest spurred their mounts to catch up, for huge heads were appearing on the hill crest - giant heads. The rest would soon follow, and not one of the men cared to stay and see if the creatures in this horde were interested in surrendering.

Chapter 4

The remainder of their trek through the hills was rather anticlimactic. A brush with some passing brigands and a few incidents with prowling carnivores of typical sort were all (hat occurred. Before a week was out the force came to the verge of the Suss Forest, the place where the easternmost arm of the woodlands came to a halt upon the northernmost slopes of the Drachensgrabs. Curley and his three attendant druids were most relieved and happy to be there, but Gord and most of the others didn't share the prospective joys of the forest, for the Suss was renowned for its dangerousness, being the high road for humanoids and various less desirable creatures seeking haven in the wilderness of the Pomarj. When such traffic existed, predators found it to be a steady food source and settled down to inhabit the region.

Any creature that hunted ores, bugbears, and ogres was bound to be a tough customer for anyone else to face, including seasoned adventurers such as these troops were. Furthermore, lancers on horseback were entirely out of their element in timber. Just as Gellor had predicted, the lieutenants of the company met and voted that the men ride east to seek employment with the Lord of Elredd. That was that.

The few remaining members of the sundered company were formidable enough without the mercenaries who had ridden away. And they were certainly varied: Gellor the bard; Curley Greenleaf with his three aspirant druids in tow; Gord; the Chakyik barbarian, Jokotai; and three mercenary adventurers who thought their prospects were brighter with such as this group - a Flan named Incosee and two crossbowmen called Moon and Patrick respectively. The latter two were appreciative of the care Curley had given them, his druidic power saving both men from death due to wounds suffered in the fight against the verbeeg. Now both determined to be obligated to him, and the druid was less than pleased about that but could not dissuade either one.

Before night fell, the ten adventurers comprising the band rode northeast out of the hills and along the edge of the Suss Forest, taking care to leave as little sign of their trail as possible. If any followed the company, they were likely to take the obvious track left by the larger group and ignore the few who went off in another direction. That is what Gellor wished.

"Before I leave you," the half-elven druid and ranger told his comrades, "I must reveal what has transpired. . . ."

"About time, Curley!" Gord interjected. "This is a long story, Gord, and if any of you hope to sleep this night, I suggest that you interrupt infrequently . . . if at all." The rotund druid paused and looked around at the faces of his companions, letting the seriousness of his statement sink in.

"Very impressive, you half-breed reprobate," Gellor contributed, "but let's cut the theatrics, or your account will be spun on until dawn. . . . He enjoys his role, you know," Gellor said, now addressing the others, "for it isn't often that everyone has to listen to this windbag. Now we must!"

"I refuse to rise to your baiting. The views of a one-eyed old scoundrel are necessarily . . . ahem . . . limited in their perspective!" Smiling gently at his own wit, Curley Greenleaf launched into his exposition without further delay.

"The result of my efforts - that is, the combined work of Gord, here, our missing associate Chert, a steely-eyed and thick-hewed barbarian, and me, of course - released a powerful relic into the proper hands. That is to say, the object was somehow brought from its obscurity and inaccessibility by forces beyond our understanding at the time of its need, the supernatural influences seemingly utilizing we three, and now the druidical circles, and the Hierophants too, to further their ends. As to the nature of these unknown powers, I can not speak, for I know aught of them and only suppose their actuality. Of the relic, however, I can speak with considerable enlightenment, understanding given to me by others - including our companion, Gellor.

"The object of power enabled concerned parties to uncover a great plot. The relic is the counterbalance to an artifact of the most malign forces ever known to this world. These forces of Evil are epitomized, if not actually controlled, by the lost god, Tharizdun ... he who is wrapped in ebon slumber. Should that one awaken, all beings of malign power, all bad things, every evil creature must bend their necks to him. Listen carefully to my saying! The Dukes of Hell, the Princes of the Abyss, and all those baneful rulers of the planes between devil and demon must and will be united under Tharizdun's wicked might!

Aeons ago, he was entrapped by those deities who understood that this greatest Evil must be fettered or all Goodness would perish from this world and possibly the entire multi-verse. Acting in concert, these entities managed to enmesh Tharizdun in a manner that turned his own evil upon him, slowly spinning a cocoon of power that, being of his own making,

wrapped and entrapped him in a way he could not avoid. But because it was a web spun from his own malign deeds and drawing upon his very forces, the terrible one of utter darkness would not willingly finish the work. Too late to untangle the bindings, he could still exist and wield a limited wickedness bound as he was. Thereupon, those who had conjoined to create this subtle snare had then to complete their task. They did so, but Tharizdun understood too, and used his still mighty force to resist. Those who struggled against him had hoped that Tharizdun himself would complete the web, thus bringing about his own annihilation. ... A forlorn hope indeed, considering the greatness of Tharizdun's wicked and malign powers.

"No binding they could make could destroy him, but they enwrapped him in blackest realms, in a slumber so total that only faint echoes of Tharizdun's vileness could exude from him. Still, these faint dreams of his empower much of the evil that permeates the lower planes. Being also of other making, the mesh that enwraps Him of Utter Darkness is imperfect. Of necessity it contains an opening, a means of unraveling the weaving, loosing the bonds. Tharizdun sleeps but is not dead! The key to unlock, cut, break, and open the prison is here, hidden in various places, on our own Oerth."

Greenleaf s audience stirred uneasily at this, but the druid spoke on. "It is an artifact of evil, an object of power whose parts are threefold. One brings the powers of Lawful Evil into play, the second yokes Neutral Evil, and the last bonds Chaotic Evil and forms the whole. Once joined, these separate portions become the true artifact, and it has force far greater than its disjointed parts. Such is the rule of the multiverse - every puzzle must have its parts, every riddle an answer, every lock a key. No solution must be simple by necessity of this immutable demand, but simple or near-impossible, it is as it is. Thus, the key to the reawakening of Tharizdun is complex, scattered, and hidden. The concealment had been such that those who accomplished it had envisioned but little prospect of ft ever being comprehended, the object found and assembled. Being wise beyond our ken, though, they made provision should the unlikely occur. That provision we unearthed in due course, and its conundrum was revealed.

"The relic now resting with the Cabal may be known only at such time as the first of the three fragments of the malign artifact comes into evil hands. No matter if Good or Evil wards the relic, whether or not Law or Chaos guards it, no use is possible unless its counterpart is active. Thus, the

bandits who saw the relic could speak only of seeing a treasure and nothing else. That we now possess and operate it bodes ill for the world. It goes without saying that all forces are involved. Evil in its three modes now works to bring the artifact into conjunction - intelligently, blindly, no matter, for powers beyond their gods and rulers now operate. Likewise, Good makes common cause with Concordant Opposition, Law with Chaos. Should Tharizdun be roused from his ebon slumber, then only Evil will remain when he ascends.

"How can little folk such as we hope to do what deities cannot? Rest assured, my good friends, that those far beyond our powers ask the same question. Still the Hierophants of Cabal, Golden Dawn, and Rosy Cruciform stand ready to serve, as do high priests and arch-mages, the circles of each Archdruid, the tiers of the Circle of Eight, high and low, prince and peasant. Because Evil musters its hordes, marshals its human servants, so likewise must all who oppose it gather to the standard. Perhaps the might of our six parts will be equal to the force of the tripartite Evil, bolstered by the baneful sendings of Tharizdun's comatose mind, and thus the key will be kept weak and disjointed ... or perhaps not. That must be determined, at least in part, by what we do.

"We have a mission. It has befallen on our little band to bear a heavy burden. I must explain this now, and then you must each decide whether or not you will accept."

Gellor rumbled deep in his chest, and then looked from face to face, studying each of the other listeners. "I already know what our good druid is about to say, and I have made my choice. I am committed, just as Curley Greenleaf said, irrevocably bound to carry this task through until the end. I warn you all to consider the import of this. Make no pledge you will not keep unto death!"

Each of the men nodded, in turn, as the one-eyed bard met their two eyes with his lone orb. The druid then resumed.

"The prisoner Gord took was a monk, a monastic practitioner of martial arts involving body weaponry principally, rather than the arms we commonly employ. This was not just any such person, I tell you. Not only was this man a master called North Wind, but he was high in the councils of the Scarlet Brotherhood. Being one wed to Evil, and lawfully oriented, this fellow quickly turned his coat in order to have his miserable life spared.

"It is no secret that the Brotherhood of the Scarlet Sign is evil - and serves Evil. However, we did not understand until now just how devoted it is. The order itself mimics the bases of ultimate wickedness. Consider how the lowest and largest portion of the Brotherhood consists of chaotic-minded thieves. Above them are the assassins, indifferent to all save Evil, and above all are the monks. These leaders are precise and orderly, organizing and planning; controlling the spread of malign power. What Master North Wind revealed, he did not realize. We, aware of events beyond his perspective, did.

"On the surface, the cause of the Brotherhood is to elevate the Suloise race to its so-called rightful position as masters of all humankind. Now, red-clad soldiers march from Spineridge below the Vast Swamp westward some seven hundred miles to the waters of Densac Gulf. Ships of the Brotherhood bring their tyranny to the Olman Islands, the shores of Hepmonaland . . . and the Pomarj. Ostensibly, this was to place pale-eyed Suloise overlords to rule lesser humans, but the true purpose of their movements is now revealed.

"The Scarlet Sign serves Tharizdun above all other of their Evil deities. Somehow the leaders of the Brotherhood - not just monks, but wicked clerics, cavaliers, magic-users, all - have conspired to find and unite the scattered portions of the artifact, which will free their god and bring his ultimate evil-ness upon all life.

"Perhaps they see that even total Evil must have some structure and look to form it. I know not. Whatever their reasoning or rationale, they have labored in darkness to bring forth this malign thing. The Scarlet Brotherhood holds the first of the parts of the artifact somewhere within their lands!"

Curley Greenleaf paused, licked his lips, and then called on his listeners. "Now each of you must swear allegiance to the others of this band, and pledge to keep its quest until completed or death ends the obligation; or else you must now leave our company and nevermore be part of it!"

This was something Gord could understand and be moved by. A task with meaning, a reason beyond his own existence! He was the first to make his oath. The three lesser druids followed, naturally; then the Chakyik, Jokotai, grinned broadly and made his commitment with nonchalance. "After all, what tiger fears death?" he said easily. Incosee pledged, probably as much in hatred of the Suel as to confound Evil. Only the two fighters, Moon and

Patrick, remained unspeaking. All eyes turned toward them. Moon stood and spoke.

"I gotta speak for both of us, 'cause Patrick ain't much for doin' so hisself. Him an' me is just ordinary sorts, guys who decided carryin' a spear would be a better way ta earn a livin' than pushin' a plow or sumthin' like that. We ain't much in anyone's book, ya know. We're both pretty much satisfied ta do our duty an' let be otherwise. . . ." Moon cleared his throat nervously, shuffled a bit, then managed to go on.

"What I guess I'm sayin' for both of us is that we really didn't suppose you'd want a couple of little nobodies like us two on a deal like this. If it's us you want, though, you better believe we're with the gang until it's over!" With that he sat down, blushing at having said so much.

Silent Patrick and proud comrade Moon were both sworn to the quest, and the band numbered ten.

"Now," the druid told them, "I can say that our mission is to find the second part of the artifact before the Scarlet Brotherhood does. This heavy burden comes upon us because we are the nearest and most capable force to do so. Others could be sent for, but what reaction would this bring from the enemy? They think their secret safe for now, and we must not give them reason to suppose otherwise - until it is too late for them to do anything about it!

"In questioning Master North Wind and examining the papers he so readily gave over to save his life, we discovered a clue that makes the Brotherhood's activity in the Pomarj meaningful. What the servants of the Red Abomination thought was that the next portion was located within the Drachensgrabs, buried deep under Wormsjaws - but actually it is probably hidden within the confines of the Suss!

"Perhaps now the Brotherhood has learned what we know. Their castellan, the clerical Elder Brother of the order, had just discovered that his superiors had been wrong. He kept this information from all others, desiring to bring it himself to the Oldest, as they call their supreme leader, to gain personal benefit. The assault of Prince Ulek's army wrenched his machinations severely. At the last he managed, just barely, to send a messenger to the Brotherhood.

"That one will probably arrive in Kro Terlep soon, not knowing the true import of his message. The captive monk did not. But the leaders of the Scarlet Brotherhood will certainly understand, and they will hasten to make

amends for their past error by sending agents to steal the second portion quietly. If they suspected our band was even now making for the same objective, their reaction would be massive and most terrible. By risking ourselves, we spare thousands. We are the hope against Evil, and we must not fail!"

Chapter 5

The silken noose dropped so suddenly that Gord was unaware of it until he was strangling only his instinctive grab for the slender cord encircling his neck saved him from a broken neck as he was jerked from his hurst'. The animal made a frightened neighing at the sudden removal of his rider. Gord swung back and forth like a pendulum, clutching at the tightening snare with one hand, supporting his weight with the other.

Jokotai, riding just ahead of him, whirled at the sound of Cord's warhorse voicing its sudden fright. Despite his predicament, Gord was amazed at the sheer speed of the Chakyik's archery, for the nomad had two shafts drawn and released even as Gord swung forward.

Whatever had lassoed him gave a horrid, hissing shriek. The arrows from Jokotai's horn bow had told! Gord managed to loosing the noose just enough to draw air into his lungs. He grabbed the cord with both hands, intending to haul himself up along its length to get at whatever had snared him thus. The nomad had let fly a third shaft and was nocking a fourth when he and his mount were enmeshed in a net of silken strands.

Clambering upward, hand over hand, Gord looked up toward his attacker. His blood ran cold when he saw the bipedal thing crouched on the broad limb above. It looked as if a man had been crossed with a spider to form a bristle-haired, clawed, pot-bellied monstrosity with too-long arms - and fangs that dripped a blue-green venom! He must face this? The creature had three arrows protruding from its body, yet its attention was fixed on Gord, eyes red-filled with bloodlust, great mouth open and ready to sink home its poisonous teeth. It uttered a clacking sound when it saw Gord look up, and began using its long, clawed fort-limbs to haul Gord upward. It could not wait for its victim to climb to the perch - the monster wanted to devour its morsel now!

Holding fast to the cord with his left hand again, Gord managed to free his shortsword. His rate of ascent slowed because he no longer hauled himself up, but the creature above was picking up its own pulling, so that Gord was brought upward in a rapid series of jerks. No more than a foot from the gaping jaws of the hairy thing, Gord thrust his sharp-bladed weapon with all his strength, straight through the roof of the monster's mouth.

The thing gurgled and fell backward, and Gord plummeted earthward as it no longer held the noosed line fast. He dropped some twenty feet,

halfway to the ground, before he could let go of the shortsword and manage to grasp the cord with both hands again. The line was elastic enough to bounce Gord around on its end several times. After this, however, the cord contracted, and this left him swinging some three feet off the ground. It was time now to hang on with the right and draw dagger with the left. A second more, and the deed was accomplished. Gord stood on firm ground, tugged the noose free, and jerked his sword from where it stuck, point-first, in the earth. Drawing labored breaths through his bruised throat, the young thief looked to find what had happened with the netted horse barbarian.

Jokotai was down, as was his horse. Another of the bristle-haired things was attacking the pair. Somehow the monstrosity had managed to bite the nomad's horse. The animal was kicking convulsively from the venom, but Gord thought the attack fatal - watch out for those fangs! Jokotai had managed to get his heavy knife free despite the net, and he had slightly wounded the spiderlike humanoid.

The remainder of the party was too far ahead to hear the commotion on the trail behind, so even as he and Jokotai had to deal with these creatures, the others were riding farther and farther away. Gord had to act quickly; if the Chakyik was wounded by those envenomed fangs, there would be no saving him. for both Curley and Gellor must be a mile distant!

The creature was tearing at its own net with its razorlike claws, gritting at Jokotai's leg. The nomad stabbed futilely, trying to fend it off. The thing was about to bite the kicking leg when Cord's dagger sunk to its hilt in the monster's side. As had its fellow, the creature gave a hissing howl; then it chattered and sprang sideways upon the young thief, bowling him over and preventing him from using his sword. Its claws pierced leather, but the mesh of elfin mail beneath stopped them from causing further damage.

The monster was intent upon closing its jaws upon its victim, though, despite the inability of its raking to inflict harm. As it sought to bite Gord's face, the desperate young adventurer managed to gather both of his feet together. Kicking with all his might, Gord drove the foul form away. The creature flew a few feet backward from the force of the combined boot heels, then leaped toward his prey again, jaws working, fangs dripping poison.

Gord cut wildly with his shortsword as he rolled, back-flipped, and did his best to gain fighting distance between himself and the bristly thing. The slashing blade had inflicted a minor cut. more by accident than design, and

this kept the monster at bay sufficiently for the young thief to gain a defensive stance. The thing crouched on all fours, bunched itself, and sprang, once more, sailing straight toward Gord at incredible velocity.

This firm: he was ready; Gord's sword took the thing full in the chest. "I hen both combatants were down and rolling in an entangled hall. Venom burned his bare flesh, but it was merely from splatter, not fangs. Gord tore free and leaped up. The spider-man was unmoving. A pair of feathered shafts protruded from its back. Jokotai nodded unsmilingly at his comrade. They were now even. While Gord had engaged the creature, the nomad had cut through the entangling net and plied his horn bow. Both men were still examining the eight-digited limbs and multi-pupiled eyes when their associates trotted back to where the life-and-death struggle had occurred.

"So you've met an ettercap," was all that Gellor said.

Although they had to traverse only some forty miles of the Suss Forest, it took them almost five days to do so, even with the skills of druids and ranger to assist their progress. The forest was a dark, tangled place of huge trees, fallen logs, thorns, and tangled undergrowth. Using game trails helped, but it exposed the party to attacks such as that which Gord and Jokotai had undergone.

Worse, the place abounded with much more dangerous adversaries. Gord still shuddered when he remembered the battle between a migrating tribe of kobolds and a group of gibberlings. The more intelligent and better-armed kobolds had outnumbered the subhuman gibberlings by nearly two to one - perhaps three hundred of the scaly little humanoids had fought against one hundred seventy-five of the howling, naked gibberlings armed with crude swords and billets of wood. The kobolds had skewered many of the attackers with spears and javelins, then fought in a swirling melee of swords and axes, spears and clubs. Fully half of their number were slain before the kobolds broke and fled, leaving the chattering and howling gibberlings to drag off their feast to some lair deep within the tangled woods.

The group of adventurers had watched the battle from a ridge above the glen where the two forces met. They were careful to avoid both the direction of the routed remnants of the kobolds and the path of the hundred or so surviving gibberlings as well. Although the creatures were individually weak, either of these groups would certainly wipe them out in these close quarters.

On the afternoon of their fifth day of travel through the Suss, the nine finally left the trees behind. Men and horses were tired, dirty, sweaty, scratched, and bitten, thoroughly in need of rest and cleaning. By pressing themselves and their mounts, the little band of adventurers made miles fall behind throughout the late afternoon and evening, and just after darkness fell, a collection of warm, glowing lights signaled the end of their immediate quest.

Within an hour all were bathed, fed, and abed. The place was too small for them to actually refurbish their clothing and such, but when they rode off late the next morning, men and horses were in far better condition than when they had come into the hamlet the previous night. Although they had almost another hundred miles to go before they reached the town of Badwall, the going would be easy compared to their forest passage. With roads to follow and wayside hostels at the end of each day's journey, the adventurers were confident and cheerful as they urged their mounts along.

As promised, Curley Greenleaf was awaiting them when they arrived in Badwall. The nine rode into the courtyard of the Brass Ball, a large inn situated at the western end of town. As typical of all metropolitan communities, Badwall's officials took count of their citizens periodically, and according to what Gord had been told, there were some five thousand souls all told. Yet, from what the young thief observed, and he had practiced such estimation often in judging a place with an eye toward the possibilities of successful application of his profession, Badwall should boast a population nearer eight or ten thousand inside its walls, and perhaps another quarter of that number dwelling in its outskirts. It was a poor place, relying on local crafts, some mercantile exchange, export of honey and wax, and the employment and return of its mercenary company to bolster its economy periodically. Barter was common, for hard money was scarce. This pleased Gord and the others, since a copper common was as valuable in Badwall as a silver noble would be in Greyhawk. No wonder its soldiers returned home after serving elsewhere! A few gold orbs virtually made a man a prince in this place.

The druid had reserved all of the better rooms in the Brass Ball, and the group was swarmed with attendants eager to provide services in return for a few iron drabs, brass bits, or bronze zees. The adventurers spent the next few days re-equipping themselves, resting, and planning an expedition into the forest once again, this time in search of the fabled lost city supposedly

abandoned by the Suloise centuries ago. Greenleaf told them that he had given full intelligence of the matter to his superiors, who, in turn, would spread it to all the others concerned. He had then been given leave to go back to his friends and tell them that they would be receiving a further reinforcement to round out their party.

"In any event," Curley told them, "we must not appear to be anything more than a band of adventurers seeking some treasure and excitement. If our true mission is suspected, agents and spies serving the Scarlet Sign will surely be alerted!"

"Then we are not here to recruit a company?" asked the one-eyed bard.

"No, old friend, we are not," Greenleaf" replied. "I know that had been our plan, but events move too swiftly. A small, strong party will be more useful than a large one now. ... I am certain you realize this."

As Gellor nodded agreement, Gord asked, "For whom do we tarry, then? If the Brotherhood knows that the object of their search is near here, and that this information might have been discovered by their enemies when Strandkeep Castle fell, then they too must be mounting an expedition."

"There are two servants of the Circle of Eight here, agents who have no little skill and power in human terms. One is a dweomercrafter of high standing, the other a knight of renown who left his clerical studies to take up sword and lance against Evil," the druid explained. "This, and that the two are sworn foes of the Suloise cause and the dark Tharizdun, is all I have been told. We are to meet them here, not later than day after tomorrow. They will be recognized by their holy symbols, the silver unicorn horn and green tree. If they do not come by the time appointed, we are to push on without them. That could prove difficult, however, for the cavalier is the one who possesses knowledge of that region of the Suss which we must explore."

"How comes a cavalier," Jokotai inquired, "to have rede of such a tangle as that forest? It is not chivalrous to trek in woods."

Greenleaf shrugged. "Who knows what purpose she has been serving here along the Wild Coast?" He paused in thought for a moment, and his one-eyed friend suggested a possible reason.

"The Circle of Eight is known to me, Curley. Those who sit on its uppermost tier are always seeking after treasure . . . for whatever purposes they might have. Could it be that these two were after the legendary city

and its fabled hill of gem-stones?" Gellor smiled at the group. "That, my comrades, would explain their purported knowledge of the Suss."

"Speculation leads us nowhere," the normally taciturn Incosee said. "We will find out soon enough - or else we will not. I think we should find another guide just in case these two fail to materialize."

After agreement from Jokotai, Moon, Patrick, and even Gord, the druid consented to a cautious search on the morrow for a possible guide. The problem took care of itself, however, when they descended to the inn's common room. A nondescript fellow arrayed in the garb of a mercenary - plain clothing, leather, and well-worn weapons - stood up and approached them.

"Your pardon, Good Folk," he began with a slight bow, "but I could not help noticing your determined nature and capable appearance. I am Blonk, a fighter and explorer for hire. There is little employment here in Badwall at this time, and if you are mounting an expedition which could use services such as my own, I am available . . . and would be most grateful."

"A sell-sword is no rare commodity," Gellor said flatly. "What makes you preferable to any of the dozens of others available?"

Gord was surprised at first, for the one-eyed bard had made no denial of their purpose. On second thought, though, Gord supposed that their appearance was such that no denial would have been effective and would only have drawn suspicion rather than avoided it. As a party of adventurers, they could have any of a score of reasons to be here. The young thief observed the mercenary as he replied.

"I fight well. I am familiar with this area, too, knowing the land from Highport to Warwell, Suss Forest to Woolly Bay. Having been raised in the woodlands, I hunt and track with some skill. As a man of professional ability, I am independent and need no advance payments . . . other than equipage suitable for whatever mission is to be undertaken, for I seek aught save a fair share of any gain I have assisted the company in attaining."

Curley Greenleaf was studying this man, Blonk he said his name was, as he spoke. Gord noted this careful scrutiny. There didn't seem much to see, actually, the young thief thought. Being used to observation of this sort himself, Gord had assessed Blonk immediately as a capable chap. The eyes were hard, although his face was seemingly mild. He had light brown wavy hair, hazel eyes, skin tanned by sun and wind as one would expect from a mercenary who spent much time in the field. His clothing and light armor

were old but cared for properly and in good shape. Longsword and dag showed signs of having seen much employment but were likewise clean and polished. He was not without funds, Gord estimated, although his purse would be lean, with more drabs than nobles within it.

"Blonk, isn't it?" the druid said rhetorically. "Well, sir, we just might have need of your services in a day or three. Our party has yet to make up its mind, so to speak, as to whether or not we go to seek our fortunes where Lord Elredd assails the foemen in the Pomarj, or to make for Fax and the seaborne raiders who trouble it of late. If we are looking -for another sword, and guide as well, where shall we find you?"

"Thank you, druid. I shall be found easily enough, for I stay here at the Brass Ball, for a time at least. The ostler will direct you to me if you seek my services. I am the man if you face danger and want staunch fighters at your back." So saying, Blonk the mercenary nodded, bade them a good day, and strode to the hall beyond.

"What think you?" Curley asked Gellor.

"Fortuitous for us he should be here and volunteer . . . perhaps too fortuitous," the one-eyed adventurer replied.

"He is not as fine a swordsman as I," Jokotai said, "but he has a steel to him which tells me he is a tough adversary worthy of the contest."

Still discussing the pros and cons of accepting Blonk into their party should the need arise, they trooped out of the inn to go on their various errands. Many small details needed to be taken care of before they departed the walled town for their dangerous quest into the fastness of the wild Suss Forest.

It took only a little time for Gord to feel something wrong. Eyes were watching him. Having put many a prospective mark under surveillance himself, the young thief instinctively knew when others were marking him. Gord had separated from the others, intending to look for a few things particular to his own wants. The marketplace in Badwall was strung out along three axes that met in the open square. His watchers had certainly picked him up at the plaza and followed him to his present location along one of the side streets.

Gord tarried, peering into windows, spending time inside shops, and generally doing nothing that a casually browsing shopper would not have done. Meanwhile, he tried to discover the identity of those who were

observing him. No success. Whoever they were, they were skilled at their art.

After spending about an hour at this game, Gord decided to return to the square and rendezvous with his associates. By doing this he finally managed to discover that there were two, possibly three, men following him. One was ahead now, so that meant that another was somewhere behind him. Another inconspicuous figure moved back and forth across the narrow street, occasionally coming quite near to Gord. Because he had not done so before, Gord supposed that his followers were becoming overconfident and careless - playing a game among themselves for their private amusement. The young thief decided that he would do his best to make them regret it.

Evening shadows were falling across the small plaza, and stalls and carts were closing. Incosee, Moon, and Patrick had just joined Gellor and Jokotai. The latter pair were munching on some confection purchased from ajust-closed booth, washing the honey and nut cake down with a crock of wine, which the Chakyik never seemed to be without. Where Curley and his satellites were, Gord didn't know, but he hoped that they'd arrive soon. The young thief wished to inform his friends of the situation quickly, so that they could be prepared for whatever might happen . . . and Gord was beginning to feel that something was going to transpire soon. He nonchalantly waved to his comrades as he strolled near. There was no doubt in his mind that Gellor had caught the flickering of his fingers and the set of his motion - signals that demanded immediate attention and conveyed warning.

"Successful shopping, Gord?" the one-eyed bard asked, but as he said this, his own hands were carefully querying Gord as to his concern. No one not in the group around him would have noticed such a signal, not even a skilled thief or Rhennee mountebank.

"Nothing doing," the young thief replied. "Where is Greenleaf and his trio of apprentice druids?" Gord flashed a warning that he was trailed by two or three experienced men as he casually conversed in vocal fashion.

Gellor tilted his head toward the town gate nearby. "Curley and his three associates went off about half an hour ago to find some herb or other. They are to meet us at the inn - let's off!" The one-eyed adventurer matched action to word, striding purposefully for the Brass Ball.

Gord understood this without benefit of any additional communication. If Curley and his inexperienced apprentices were caught somewhere outside

the town by determined attackers, they could be in trouble. Jokotai, Incosee, and the two fighters hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary during the whole of the exchange between thief and bard; so the four simply followed after Gellor and Gord, assuming that their comrades were anxious to find the rest of their party and set plans for tomorrow's leavetaking. The group quickly covered the short distance to the place where the large, tarnished globe of brass marked their inn. Gellor was leading them on past the Brass Ball toward the gate, certainly planning to seek the druids wherever they might be beyond the portal, when the husky half-elf and his trailing novices appeared, passing through the heavy gates and heading toward the inn.

Greenleaf waved cheerily, and his friends stood waiting for the four druids to join them outside the hostel. While Patrick and Moon were discussing something quietly between themselves, and Incosee was likewise engaged in idle banner with Jokotai, Gord was alertly scanning the area for those men who had watched and followed him, and Gellor's posture and movements indicated that he too was on the lookout for trouble. It came almost immediately.

"Watch yourself, damned churls!" This was spat disdainfully from a well-dressed horseman exiting the stableyard of the inn. He had nearly ridden down Incosee, and as he cursed the dark warrior, he kicked his booted foot at the Chakyik next in line. There were five or six other horsemen behind the first, all coming at a trot now and drawing their swords.

"Silly shit," Jokotai said indifferently, levering the man from his mount by means of his own extended foot. The fellow crashed heavily to the paved roadway, stunned but still trying to unsheathe his longsword.

Gord and the rest scattered as the riders came up, blades flashing, trying their best to trample and hack the men before them. One managed to ride his own comrade down, just as the fallen man was regaining his feet and had his sword in hand. A horse flailed its hooves at Gord as its rider reined it back hard, slashing and wounding the Chakyik barbarian who had so rudely unseated his attacker.

Gord ducked under the animal before him, thumping its belly with a balled fist as he did so, then rolling and tumbling clear. The pain caused the horse to come down stiff-legged and buck. Its rear hooves lashed out and caught another of the mounted men on the leg. That rider yelled in agony and lost control of his mount, and soon all of the riders were milling in a confused knot, trying to regroup and resume their attack.

"These knaves need punishing!" one called, still keeping up the obvious pretense of offended gentleman at odds with surly common adventurers.

"To our Master!" cried a loud voice from the group of bystanders who had appeared as if by magic to view the melee.

Gord was virtually out of the confused scene by then, not even having drawn sword or dagger. He saw that there were a dozen or more armed men in the crowd. One he immediately recognized as being among the men who followed him earlier This whole affair was certainly well planned and orchestrated, even though the initial rush of horsemen had not had the effect that had been hoped for. More ruffian-types were congregating around Curley Greenleaf and his apprentices, while a larger force was intent on dealing with Gellor and the rest. The footmen claiming to be (he servants and retainers of their associates on horseback had produced weapons and were menacing the five adventurers, while the mounted attackers were readying to come at them from the other side. Gellor, Jokotai, Incosee, Moon, and Patrick had no place to go, caught as they were in the open area between the two forces. Neither group of foemen had yet noticed that there was one member missing from the party they were besetting.

Blades began to meet in ringing strokes. Gord had no time to worry about what was happening to Curley and his associates, realizing that unless he came to the aid of his five trapped friends, they would be in serious jeopardy. The opportunity was perfect, for Gord could fall upon the attackers from their rear and take them unawares, intent only on their supposed victims. He went into action immediately, striking low with a broad sweep of his shortsword, cutting the backs of the legs of two of the attackers, while plunging his long dagger into the unsuspecting back of a fellow about to smash Moon's head with his upraised morning star.

Just as he withdrew the poniard and dealt a finishing stroke with his sword, nearly severing the foeman's head with the blow, Gord saw the mercenary Blonk suddenly leap in among the horsemen, his longish spear playing havoc with men and horses alike. Stabbing with one end, clubbing with shaft and butt as if it were a quarterstaff, the rawboned fighter laid about him with a ferocity that momentarily impressed even as seasoned a combatant as Gord. The riders were confused and scattered by the attack, one crushed beneath his fallen stallion, another dripping blood from a long gash inflicted by the keen blade of the spear, a third trying to halt his

stampeding mount, and the other two reeling atop panicked and bucking steeds.

Gord blocked a cut from a broad-bladed sword and riposted with a long lunge that skewered his adversary through the chest. Gellor and Incosee were fighting back now with confidence, not having to worry about their backs for the moment. Patrick and the bleeding Moon held one flank, while Jokotai was actually singlehandedly driving a bunch of attackers backward on the other. Gellor was engaged with a pair of hard-bitten opponents who were pressing him severely Gord wounded one of the pair so as to distract him sufficiently for his one-eyed friend to finish the deed and concentrate on the remaining opponent.

Of the original gang of ruffians who had beset them, at least a half-dozen were dead, as many sorely wounded, and most of the others bloodied to some extent. Being what they were, they broke and ran. Several more of the thugs died in the process, but the remainder made good their escape, leaving their dead and wounded to whatever fate befell them.

The horsemen had fared little better, although their quality was certainly superior to that of their so-called henchmen. Gord noted that somehow the doughty Blonk had managed not only to remain alive but was still carrying the fight to his mounted adversaries. Of the seven who had begun the fray, four still sat atop their steeds and fought. It was nearly impossible, but the lone footman, armed only with his spear and incredible courage, kept them at bay and managed to occasionally deliver a solid attack upon one or another of the riders as well.

Gellor ignored the whole, running past to see to the safety of the druids, for they were still engaged in melee with the ruffians who had attacked them. Gord sprang high, landing on the rump of a startled horse, feet first. Before the animal could react, the young thief had cut its rider's shoulder with a sure sword-stroke and vaulted to a similar position atop the next horse. With a scything stroke of his dagger, he took its rider out of combat, the narrow blade penetrating the exposed place under the man's armpit and killing him. As the horse whinnied and reared, Gord was off and striking the withers of yet another of die animals, using the flat of his sword to send the horse into panic.

"Thanks, comrade," the spear-wielding mercenary said as he tugged the weapon free from where the horseman had impaled himself on the heavy-bladed shaft as he fell from the bucking gelding. "That does for the lot."

The lone survivor of the seven mounted attackers had indeed spurred for parts unknown. Gord didn't waste time in conversation. "This way," he called to Blonk as he ran to the place Gellor and the rest now battled. There was no further work for his red-stained blades, however, or for the deadly spear that the mercenary plied. By the time the two men came to reinforce the rest, the few remaining attackers had dropped their weapons and were begging for quarter. At about the same time a large squad of die city watch arrived, crossbows cocked and at the ready.

"Lay down your arms and cease fighting!" The order was given somewhat uncertainly by the captain of the group of city guards, for he was wise enough to recognize a tenuous situation when he saw one. Before him were a band of obviously capable adventurers who had just roughly handled and defeated twice their number. Now he, with a score of soldiers of little more than militia quality, must try to disarm these veteran warriors and spell-casters and march them off to face a town magistrate! As the man feared, his command was greeted with something other than compliance.

"Arrest this lot here, if you will," replied a tall, muscular man with a black eyepatch, "but leave honest wayfarers be. We have had quite enough for one day, and I don't think my friends here will take kindly to any official folderol from you and your pups."

The officer did his best to hide fear under a stern countenance, and the men with him made aggressive sounds and held their weapons menacingly still, but the captain knew that none of this posturing was having any effect whatsoever. Grumbling and threatening to return with the full weight of Badwall’s watch behind him, the fellow herded the cowed ruffians into a bunch and made do with that bag. After sternly ordering the innkeeper to see that the bodies scattered in gory pools around the front of the Brass Ball were neatly stacked and left undisturbed for official investigation, the captain hustled his prisoners off, leaving Gord and his associates to their own devices.

"Get everything together quickly," Curley Greenleaf said with finality. "It is absolutely necessary that we leave here immediately. You have ten minutes to be ready. If you aren't here, then I leave without you in the appointed time - understood?" All nodded agreement. "You," the druid added, pointing an accusing finger toward Blonk, "are coming along with us as swordsman and guide."

Blonk evidently had no choice. The druid's statement was an order, not a request. The mercenary didn't object, simply nodded and turned on his heel to gather his belongings from the inn. The die was cast.

Chapter 6

They made excellent speed leaving Badwall. Everyone had been ready in less than the ten minutes Curley Greenleaf had allowed, and the grooms and stableboys had eagerly brought their ready mounts for them, knowing full well that their haste would be well rewarded by the clinking chinkers that filled these patrons' purses. The ostler was likewise eager to see them off - both to avoid any possible future trouble and to collect his own coins. The rotund druid was generous, he knew, and in return for a promise of sending any friends in the same general direction of travel as the druid indicated, the half-elf had richly rewarded the innkeeper, paying over a handful of copper and silver in addition to those coins that compensated for the services of the inn.

Eleven strong now, the party left the town's walls behind on galloping horses, the last light in the western sky leading them onward.

"Will we have pursuit?" Gord inquired.

"Not from the minions of the town watch," Gellor said wryly, "for they're undoubtedly glad just to be rid of such as we. . . - But of others, I know not - nor do I care to speculate at this time."

"I concur," the druid said. "We are the stuff of nightmares now, as far as Badwall is concerned. Someone desires us dead, and they were anxious enough to see it done dial they allowed their tools to assault us in the midst of the town - reckless of consequences. The lords of the place will be congratulating themselves on our departure, and not at all eager to follow. Any other troublemakers will be on our heels, and Badwall is left undisturbed once again!"

"It grows too dark for such a pace," noted the Chakyik nomad. Coming from a horseman such as Jokotai, this was a warning worth heeding.

"Agreed," Greenleaf replied, and called for the party of adventurers to slacken their reckless pace. "We still have much distance to travel this night, and wounds to be seen to ere dawn. Let us go with a care for our lives though, so that when the morrow comes, we may all greet the warm rays of the sun with gladness and good spirits."

Regular rest periods were taken, intervals of perhaps an hour on the hour, during the darkness. During these pauses, Curley used his druidical arts of healing to help mend wounds and restore vigor. The half-elf ministered to both men and animals in such good fashion that when the sun did eventually rise again in the east, the entire party was feeling nearly as well

as if they had not fought a pitched battle the day before, ridden all night, and had no real food to eat.

Even with their pauses, they had covered some twenty miles, and it was now time for the adventurers to consider what course they must follow in order to assure that they could fulfill their mission without interference from the malign activities of the Scarlet Brotherhood.

The party had left the beaten path at first, taking to the fields around Badwall to elude any immediate pursuit. During the course of the night they had come upon another track, and they had followed this path for it led in the direction of the Suss Forest and made their travel easier and quicker by far. When they had come to a tiny cluster of huts at a crossing of paths, they had swung around the little community and pressed on, unnoticed, disappearing into the cloaking darkness of the cloudy night. They were now quite near the verge of the dank and foreboding woodland, and no sign of man or his works was visible - save the faint traces of the rutted track they still followed.

"There," said Greenleaf abruptly. "That copse offers us shelter from eye and provides some small protection from marauding man or beast as well. Let us go there and rest for the trials which must be faced when we enter the Suss."

None demurred, so the eleven riders were soon amid the trees of the small grove, removing saddle and tack from tired animals. After seeing to their mounts, the adventurers set about preparing a repast for themselves. Then, with sentinels posted in pairs and a smokeless fire burning, they settled down to rest for the remainder of the day and the coming night as well. The light of the next day's sun would find them deep within the shadowy depth of the fell Suss Forest, and each man knew that this opportunity was not to be wasted.

Before the afternoon shadows were long, all save the two sentries were asleep, stomachs full, dreaming whatever dreams each held within the limitless expanses of his own mind. Gord was one of the two standing watch, and it was he who first saw the two riders heading directly for the copse of trees that sheltered the band, following the faint tracks the riders had left behind when they came to this place.

"Patrick, hsst!" Gord called softly to alert his fellow guard to the approaching pair. "See there! Rouse Curley and Gellor - quick now!"

In a minute the whole party was awake and alert, watching as the two riders came ever closer. They were but a bowshot distant now, and Gord could discern that one was a woman, the other a man. Oddly, the former wore armor while the latter was garbed in nondescript robes. No amount of observation could discover any others with the two. They were alone, evidently - not the advance scouts of some larger body of tracking foes. Gellor and Greenleaf held a brief, whispered conversation, and then the druid grinned and nodded.

"All of you, be ready. I shall cast a spell to disguise us all as trees. Circle round our clearing here, and leave the horses be. We shall see what the wolves on our track think when they discover no one save some nags at home for their call!" So saying, the druid motioned them to places he felt perfect for his purpose and then began his dweomer.

This was all new and strange to Gord. One minute he was himself - and the very next he was a tree, but one that could somehow see! He felt his arms, legs, and body - yet he had roots and leaves too! He sensed other human-trees also, and could actually observe such growth where once Incosee and Gellor had stood. A bird fluttered its way onto one of his outstretched fingers, perched, and twittered its little song. Gord wished to smile, but the hard bark of his skin wouldn't allow such freedom. This was a perfect disguise beyond all of the arts he had ever learned. The pair of horsemen - horsewoman and horseman, rather - entered the now-smaller glen and reined up short.

"This is a strange rede, Oscar."

"Nay, Deirdre, not strange at all. ... I sniff a dweomer druidic."

"At them!" shouted Curley Greenleaf, suddenly changing from an ash tree to his own true form even as Gord was watching.

Feeling instantly enlivened and free, Gord sprang forward, drawing his sword in the same smooth motion, which brought him to a position ready to attack the interlopers from their flank. The others of the little company were likewise freed, and began whatever actions they deemed best to overwhelm these two who sought to prevent the party from succeeding in its quest. The young thief was, in fact, almost at the point where he could strike the robed man - a magic-user, judging from die motions he was frantically performing as the disguised group suddenly changed from harmless trees to armed warriors before his startled eyes. His female companion was also readying

her own defenses, shield before her, lance lowered, when another shout rang out.

"Hold!" It was Curley Greenleaf once again, only this time he was frantically attempting to stop the attack he had just precipitated.

"Stop!" echoed the one-eyed bard as he too recognized the emblems that the two displayed openly at their breasts. Gord saw that both wore the silver unicorn horn of the goddess Ehlonna, and the green of an oak to symbolize a unity with nature. These were the two sent from the Circle of Eight to assist them with their quest for the second part of the evil artifact!

Although the horsewoman was in motion, her lance leveled and her horse urged to a canter, she managed to control the animal and come to a sudden halt at the combined cries of druid and bard. Likewise, her associate did not continue with his spell casting, but at the call for a cessation of attack, simply ducked and avoided Gord's faltering blow.

All in all it was a near thing, but no harm was done. Curley and his one-eyed friend were quick to make amends for the near-fatal encounter, explaining that they had been beset in Badwall and were now doubly wary and perhaps a bit too ready to defend themselves. The magic-user, Oscar, was not impressed by the whole matter, but his female companion seemed totally relaxed and unaffected once it was called to a halt.

"You chubby trickster!" she cried to the half-elven druid. "That little enchantment you pulled on the two of us nearly did for me . . . and Oscar too, only he won't admit it. You are pretty good - for a man!"

Gord disliked this brash woman instantly. Girl was more like it, and a very pretty one at that, not that it made any difference to him. She was too big, too much like a man, and too loud and sure of herself.

"Well, let's not stand around with our thumbs up you know where," she said sarcastically. "I am Deirdre, a knight of Hardby and minion of True Womanhood. Despite that, I serve the Circle of Eight this day, as does my boon companion, Oscar, a wizard from the Gynarchy's good lands as well." Here she proceeded to clasp each of the company's members' hands, one after another, bidding each greeting and success. Deirdre came to Gord at last.

"Well done, little man!" she said as she grasped his hand in a powerful grip that would have made a man less strong wince. "You were near to striking poor Oscar a heavy blow when you recovered and held that stroke." She was at least an inch taller than Gord, even though he wore his high-

heeled riding boots. Her cool, green eyes and tanned face mocked his challenging stare as she looked down at him.

"You are a tough one, no?" she added. "Well, one day after we have done with this matter perhaps we'll meet on another ground and see what shall be seen."

"Charmed, m'lady," Gord replied with all the mockery he could muster as the girl knight turned and strode over to Curley Greenleaf and Gellor.

"Let us hold council, us three," she said, "while Oscar makes his peace with your fellows and we become one company. There is much to discuss if we are to succeed in this mission."

Both the druid and the bard seemed to be somewhat at a loss as to how to deal with a woman such as this one. If one of their fellows had acted this way, either man would have managed the upstart easily. But she was female, and obviously a puissant fighter as well. Confident and condescending, this lady knight of the female-ruled free city of Hardby was dominating otherwise capable men simply by virtue of her sex!

Females in any profession - thief, fighter, cleric, magic-user, whatever - were not uncommon. They were accepted and given equality and full respect as a matter of course. Here, though, was a woman who was condescending to accept men as near-equals, rather than expecting that males recognize her as one of them. It was indeed overwhelming.

Oscar was a likable enough chap, Gord grudgingly admitted to himself, even though he seemed to accept his associate's superior role with bland equanimity. When Jokotai made rude suggestions as to their relative positions after dark, the magic-user merely laughed deprecatingly and went on to other matters. Gord shook his head in disgust. This fellow was no man at all!

When Incosee noticed Gord's reaction and asked the young thief if he wouldn't willingly take a turn on the bottom for a woman such as Deirdre, Gord hawked and spat his rejection. Even the taciturn Moon had to guffaw at that, for he knew his own desires as well as those of the disapproving young thief - his protests notwithstanding.

That made Gord do a bit of thinking. What did he actually feel about the tough female knight? She was good-looking - in a hardened, sun-browned way. Her hair was light brown and streaked with highlights the color of the morning sunbeams as they lanced through the foliage of the forest. Her complexion, tanned as it was, still showed fairness and a scattering of tiny

freckles across her nose and cheekbones. Despite her obvious ability, her familiarity with the outdoor life, and her muscular development, Deirdre was a desirable woman. Her armor could hide neither her prettiness nor the form that bespoke her sex. The hard steel had been shaped to conform to her curves, and imagination could easily fill in the rest, that which the metal actually concealed. No matter; Gord had seen far more beautiful women - courtesans, daughters of rich merchants, even mere trollops.

"I can get a piece of ass in many places," Gord said then, looking Incosee squarely in the eye, "and without the bitch supplying the favor demanding she be dominatrix in the bargain!"

All of the rest laughed at this, and Gord thought it was more because they doubted than believed his remonstration. He started away angrily, only to bump into both Deirdre and Oscar standing and waiting for the group to stop their banter and notice them.

"Druid Greenleaf and Lord Gellor have asked that you all join in a conference," the girl said icily. The disdain on her face was plain evidence that she had heard the whole exchange.

Gord remained quite composed. "Please inform our comrades that we will be there momentarily," he said without a trace of embarrassment.

When Deirdre turned and went back to where the two men waited, her face was flushed, but whether from anger or shame, Gord couldn't tell. The slight magic-user grinned at the assembled adventurers, bowed slightly, and then followed his companion.

Blonk made the number of the party thirteen. Nobody liked that much - not even the rugged mercenary, from what he said. Still, he was committed to the quest now, having left Badwall in somewhat of a questionable situation. They couldn't ask Blonk to return there now; whether from town officials or pursuing foes, his life would be in definite danger. So eleven had suddenly become thirteen, a dozen men and one woman - all seasoned adventurers and veterans of many a tight situation.

This group was to pierce the trackless tangles of the heart of the Suss Forest, find a lost ruin there, recover a bit of some strange and occult object of eldritch origin, and carry it safely into the hands of those who fought against Evil. Very well, they would do it or perish!

Deirdre and her associate Oscar had managed to traverse the woodland often, journeying between parts of the Wild Coast and Celene on affairs upon which neither party elaborated. Blonk too had had some experience in

the Suss, traveling and hunting it frequently during the past years. That was sufficient when coupled with the information Curley said he would furnish when the time was ripe. After a brief discussion as to how to array themselves for the coming trek, the party ended their council. Next morning they would begin the most trying part of their quest.

The usual watch was kept that night, with two sentries rather than one because the party was now relatively large. Curley Greenleaf was quite concerned about their tracks, for Deirdre and Oscar had managed to follow without difficulty. One sentinel was posted to observe there, while the other guarded the horses and watched the other perimeter of the small encampment.

The druid made a point of assigning duty so that from midnight on, first Gord, then Curley himself, would stand watch along their backtrail. Gord was trusted, of course, but Green-leaf also knew of the power that his sword bestowed upon the young thief. Between this special vision and the elven sight that Greenleaf possessed, it would be nearly impossible for attackers to surprise the party in the dark. This meant that Curley expected trouble, and that it would come from adversaries able to see in darkness, and Gord was speculating as to the nature of possible attackers throughout his two plus hours of standing guard. Nothing of unusual nature occurred, however. At the end of his period of sentry duty, he awoke the druid and headed back to his own bedroll to finish off the night with a couple more hours of sleep.

Gord saw his old friend alert the three apprentices - he couldn't ever recall their names - and then awaken the magic-user, Oscar. After a whispered conference, the apprentices fanned out along the edge of the copse as Curley and Oscar stole out of the camp eastward, surely going back over the route they had followed to gain their current position within the stand of trees. Gord was tired, but he stayed awake to learn what was going on. About half an hour later, the pair came back to the encampment. Oscar and the fledgling druids said nothing, simply returning to their places and going back to sleep. Mystified, Gord decided he'd ask about it in the morning and settled down to sleep. Full sleep would not come, but the young adventurer remained quiet and dozed off and on for about an hour, possibly longer, until he heard a distant but loud voice that sounded much like Oscar's. This was followed immediately by yells and shrieks coming from the same direction. He sprang up to learn what was happening, and in a moment everyone in the small clearing was awake and arming.

"Curley!" Gord demanded in a low voice so pitched as to carry only as far as where the druid stood. "What's going on?"

"Got the buggers!" Greenleaf replied, chortling with glee. "I thought some filthy humanoids would be used to dog our trail! Did you hear 'em howl? That was 'Uroz' they were shrieking . . . ores they are!"

Before Gord could reply, the wizard from Hardby began an incantation that drew the young thiefs attention. Outlined against the red glow to the east - the light of a spreading grass fire, not the rising sun - was a swarm of dark figures. Even as they ran toward the copse that sheltered the party, Gord saw a faint flickering emanate from Oscar's fingertips. The phenomenon disappeared instantly, and suddenly a burning sphere appeared in the midst of the onrushing attackers. It was nearly three hundred yards distant, but the globe expanded and burst with a roar, the blazing light nearly blinding Gord in the process. There were more cries, and the survivors of the fireball's terrible destruction ran right and left.

All thought of making an attack upon those within the grove of trees was certainly gone. The grass and scrub growth was blazing now - two walls of flame moving outward and toward each other. Gord was glad not to be on the receiving end of whatever the druid had done, let alone Oscar's deadly blast of magical fire. The wizard loosed a pair of lightning bolts in quick succession for good measure. These, however, came from a stubby wand Oscar had drawn from his wide sleeve.

"Hurry!" Gellor called. "Ride west quickly! Don't you think there'll be retaliation coming soon as those dogs' masters can manage to come up and deliver it?" The bard was already mounting his stallion as he spoke. Gord ran to join him, as did Oscar.

The others had saddled the mounts, and all of the party's gear was ready as well. In seconds all thirteen were in the saddle and urging their horses through the stand of timber toward the opposite side. As they broke from the copse and trotted westward, a veritable storm of fire and flashes of lightning broke out among the trees behind them. Gellor had been right, of course.

"They come after us in force!" shouted Deirdre.

"They'll be more careful after this, though," replied Greenleaf. "Thanks, Oscar, for setting up that magical voice to trigger my little berry fire trap!"

Gord filed away another mental note. In the future he would certainly be wary of cooperation between spell-workers of different callings, such as

druid and magic-user. Either alone was deadly, but it seemed that in conjunction, their effect was more dangerous still.

If there was further pursuit, it was not immediate. Their followers had been taught a lesson likely to make them slow and cautious hereafter. The party rode in darkness for only a few minutes before daylight began to brush the horizon with milky paleness, the stars faded, and vision slowly improved as shadows gave way before the sun. A few miles ahead was the beginning of the Suss Forest.

Chapter 7

Gord hadn't thought it possible, but the forest here was worse than the southern portion they had had to traverse coming from the Drachensgrabs to reach Badwall. Gord had spent a surprising amount of time in such places, considering he was a city-bred thief, and no forest he had ever traveled in - even the great ones of Nutherwood and Adri - had been like this. However, thanks to the woodcraft of Gellor, Curley and his associates, and Blonk as well, they made fair progress and never became lost in the thickets and tangles of the Suss. Deirdre and Oscar had been in this same region, and with Gord available to clamber unerringly up trees to visually scout their way, the group managed to move westward at the rate of almost two leagues each day as the crow flies. They actually traversed nearly twice that distance, considering the twists and turns of their path as they followed trails or watercourses. The journey was further slowed by ravines and marshes that had to be circumvented, predators to be avoided, and the monstrous denizens of the place to constantly guard against.

There was also the backtrail to watch, for they knew full well that the fiery repulse at the copse of trees had not deterred pursuit. Every sort of craft and dweomer possible was used to conceal and make dangerous the path the party followed. Pits with sharpened stakes were prepared by a combination of magic and manual labor; snares, deadfalls, and spring traps were set along their route. The druidical powers of Curley Greenleaf and Gellor were yoked with the magic of the wizard, Oscar, to create novel surprises such as sticks suddenly turning into venomous snakes when someone passed, trees that would become partially sentient and attack with their great limbs, and the like. They hoped thus to throw off or slow any followers so as to make their own mission a success. If they could locate their goal, it should take no more than a day to finish their work and push on westward, out of the Suss and into the clean air of the elven Kingdom of Celene and beyond.

Whatever they were doing, it seemed to be working. Going through the forest on a northwesterly axis, the party managed to reach the banks of the Jewel River eight days after entering the gloom of the Suss. They encountered remarkably few hostile creatures on the trip, and all agreed that this was probably due to their own remarkable state of alertness and preparation. Creatures avoided them, for their group certainly constituted a formidable threat to anything they were likely to come across, dragons and

swarms of humanoids notwithstanding. An unwary hunter was soon devoured by other carnivores - and this party was never unwary.

On the east bank of the Jewel, Curley Greenleaf finally broke out his secret information. It was a reproduction of an ancient map that crudely depicted the area they were in at a time long past. This drawing showed that there was a city just a few miles - as far as they could determine, anyway - north of their present position. Two days of trekking up the Jewel discovered nothing. However, there was no thought of turning back, for the map couldn't be that inaccurate, and the force pursuing would be coming from that direction anyway.

They sat down that night for a council once again. Gord had been thrown into Deirdre's proximity many times during the past week, and now he could at least tolerate her without difficulty. She showed no personal antagonism either, brushing aside his proffered apology with a comment about males having to prove their superiority while females always demonstrated the masculine effort to be fruitless. Because she obviously believed this, Gord actually reacted in a manner that tended to reinforce Deirdre's assertion. But when he realized the trap he was in, Gord quickly ceased his efforts to do anything other than excel at his own profession and otherwise keep his own counsel. Thus, they now interrelated well enough to exchange ideas freely and to contribute to the overall aims of the group.

Everyone studied the old map. No doubt crudely drawn originally, it nonetheless had been copied with exacting care. From what they could determine, they had to be within a few miles of their goal, only the ruin of the ancient city did not seem to exist. Many things were possible, but entire cities did not just disappear. Could it have been razed? If torn down stone by stone, a place such as the map depicted could be made to vanish. But there was no legend or tale that even hinted at this happening, and nothing of the sort in history, of course. Perhaps the whole thing was a fable. . . . Perhaps, but with so much evidence at hand, albeit information of cryptic sort, that seemed doubtful.

"In college," Gord said idly, "we spent some time in the study of natural history. Over ages, even the greatest of rivers change their courses, do they not?"

"You've hit on it!" Deirdre shouted, slamming Gord on the back so hard he nearly choked. "Without even knowing it," she announced to the others, "this city-bred commoner has solved a riddle even I couldn't! . . .

Noofiense, Gord - or the rest of you, for that matter. It's just that we of nobler birth are expected to bear a greater burden in such matters. Well, I say now's no time for chit-chat, but for action."

"Just so," Gellor agreed, casting an understanding smile at Gord and then a broad grin at the rest. "Our good cavalier here may not be diplomatic, but she is eager and willing. Let us press on now. From a vantage point on the river bank we can determine what needs to be investigated."

Leaving the clearing, the thirteen adventurers cut through the heavy underbrush, down a steep bluff of some twenty or thirty feet, and were soon on the relatively open bank of the river. The wizard cast one of his spells, levitating upward a hundred yards, then two hundred, surveying the whole of the surrounding territory. Oscar dropped downward like a stone then, evidently wary of possible attack by flying monsters when in such an exposed position. Gord was interested in the technique, for the wizard suddenly slowed his descent, floating much as a leaf in a gentle breeze for the final fifty feet of the descent.

"Ring of feather falling," Deirdre told him before he could ask anyone.

"There is a marshy place across the river to the south," Oscar told the awaiting company. "I could see streams and at least two large ponds there also. My supposition is that the Jewel once flowed through that area and has moved eastward since."

"Was there anything like ruins - buildings, walls, anything?" demanded Greenleaf.

The wizard considered for a moment. "No, there were no visible signs of any construction . . . but something did seem unusual."

"Out with it, man!" cried Gellor.

"The western side of the river is lower than this side, you know. I saw a few hills and ridges, but that wasn't what interested me. Haifa league downstream, about at the midpoint of the marsh there, is a small peninsula - more a point of land, actually. It is wooded, indicating it is higher than the surrounding, marsh-covered ground, and had several knolls and mounds on it. I fear it isn't much of a hope, but that's all I can give us to go on. The ancient city could, after all, have been washed away or covered by the Jewel when some cataclysm changed its course."

The river where they stood was a long bowshot across, no more. If there were narrower places, they weren't nearby, soil was decided to cross to the west bank immediately and work southward from there. That way no risk of

encountering oncoming pursuers was likely, although Oscar pointed out it would mean going through two or three hundred yards of swampy ground. Getting across with the horses was dangerous, for the river was both deep and swift. Furthermore, who knew what creatures lurked below the surface? Anything from giant garfish or pike to monstrous snapping turtles might be lying in wait for a meal!

Although they disliked doing it, Curley Greenleaf and his associates, Ash, Grover, and Lorman, located a small herd of deer and after much effort managed to drive them into the water near where the party planned to cross. These creatures swam across the river, the current carrying them downstream, so that their course toward the opposite shore was a diagonal one.

Just as the deer were past the midpoint of the channel, and as the group was already beginning to swim in the wake of the herd, something struck. There was a great swirl in the water, and one of the deer simply vanished. One second its head was visible, the next only ripples showed where it had been. From their prone positions, none of the adventurers could see what took the animal, but whatever it was had been huge.

Although everyone was very nervous, and Oscar went immediately into the air to provide some protection from that vantage point, nothing further occurred. By using the horses and swimming strongly, they were all soon safely across and concealed in the trees. The wizard ceased his magical flight and joined them, and after a bit of wringing out they began eagerly moving southward toward what they hoped was the goal of their quest.

After somewhat over a mile of forcing their way through the tangled forest, they noticed that the trees were smaller and there were tamaracks and similar water-loving kinds ahead. Then the ground underfoot became spongy and wet, quickly turning into tussocked bits of earth separated by shallow water. Before long, they were fighting against the drag of the mud, dirty and dripping with ooze, carefully choosing their path so as to avoid mires and deep pools.

There were large insects, huge spiders, and great, goggle-eyed frogs here aplenty. The batrachians evidently fed on the insects and arachnids, keeping them in relatively low numbers, and there were monstrous cranes and other gigantic wading birds that must have found the fish and frogs of the marsh most beneficial. Other than sinking forever in the muck, though, there was nothing hazardous here - at least during dieir passage - and the thirteen

bedraggled adventurers finally reached the piece of high, firm ground that formed a small peninsula jutting into the Jewel River.

"Gods, you look a filthy mess," Deirdre said to Gord.

The young thief had stumbled and fallen part way into the marsh and then had covered himself with mud in the process of extricating himself. The female knight looked relatively dean and proper despite the trek, although her armor was sullied and her hair somewhat limp with sweat. Gord tried to dean his hands on his leggings, but got them only dirtier still, for the leather garments were caked with smelly, black muck. He looked at his hands and couldn't resist. . . .

"And you look wonderful, lady chevalier!" he exclaimed to Deirdre, and then patted her on both cheeks with his muddy palms and fingers.

Deirdre tried to avoid the touch, but Gord was much too quick. "You nasty little bastard!" she shouted at him, taking a step backward and trying to draw forth her broadsword at the same time. Her foot struck something, though, so Deirdre overbalanced backward and sat down hard.

"Oh, my dear!" Gord said in mock sympathy. "You must be too exhausted to stand . . . or is it simply that a woman as large and clumsy as you are can't manage a backward step without falling like an ox?"

"Why, you - " Deirdre managed, her face flushed. Then Oscar was beside her, pressing her shoulders down so she couldn't stand and strike the japing thief with her sword in her sudden ire.

"Relax, love," the wizard said soothingly. "We are all tired and in need of a bit of a breather. Don't let something foolish," and here he gazed meaningfully toward Gord, "betray your sworn oath to serve in this endeavor!"

Deirdre made a face at him, but she relaxed.

"You do look rather silly now, dear," he said to the girl. "Almost as sorry as Gord there - and he's a muckworm if I've ever laid eyes on one."

Everyone laughed then, and the tension was dispelled. Deirdre actually grinned at Gord, sharing his discomfort at being tired and dirty, and recognizing him as part of her team, as it were. She tried to get a bit more comfortable on her seat, then she suddenly jumped up and tore at the viny growth that had been under her.

"What's wrong?" Gord exclaimed, rushing over to see if perhaps something had bitten her.

"This is a stone block!" Deirdre shouted. "I've been sitting on our lost ruin for five minutes without knowing it!" Although the shadows were growing long, the whole group was so excited about the find that everyone wanted nothing more than to begin an immediate search for the great ziggurat at the center of the ancient metropolis. The area was so overgrown with ground cover, bushes, shrubs, and all sorts of trees that the party could not actually hope to do more than a cursory search before darkness.

After an hour or so, Blonk came across a collapsed structure that was still accessible. A portion of the lower story made an acceptable shelter, the walls and roof overhead being relatively sound. The place would serve as shelter against the weather and the night prowlers. It was sufficiently large to allow the party to stable their horses as well, so before long all were securely housed, with the entry partially blocked by chunks of masonry, magical guards in place, and a small fire going at the rear of the place.

"This is not Suel workmanship," Gellor remarked as he studied the bas relief carvings on the walls revealed by the ruddy firelight. "Come here, Curley, and take a look . . . this convoluted script is like none I've ever seen!"

Although time had worn the stone somewhat, the writing and carving were still clearly definable, sheltered as the stone was within the ruin. The druid agreed that it was totally unfamiliar. Gord took a look, as did Blonk, followed by Oscar. None recognized it as anything they had previously seen. No wonder that the Scarlet Brotherhood had no intelligence regarding this ruin. Legend had said a city of the Suloise had been here, but this place was certainly of origination predating the migration of the Invoked Devastation by centuries.

Incosee was called over to examine it, but he was as puzzled as the rest. It bore no resemblance to any Flan work he had seen, and he said he had seen some of the sacred writings and idols in Tenh. This was a riddle not to be solved quickly, and certainly of no importance compared to their quest. Still, the two factors could somehow be linked, and Gord went to sleep considering such a possibility, fearful of dreams such as those that had plagued him when he had been near another ruin - one imprisoning a demon.

Deirdre had the watch just prior to Gord's turn. When she woke him, he felt terribly listless and vaguely recalled uneasy scenes from his sleep. He

whispered that he was awake and ready to stand guard, but the tough cavalier was in no rush to return to her bed.

"I'll keep you company, Gord . . . if you object not. I am too wide awake to slumber now," she added by way of explanation.

Gord was surprised but readily agreed, for he felt uneasy. "If you prefer the chill near the entry to a warm blanket, I have no objections to your company. I like this place not at all."

"It bothers you too, then?"

They moved to positions near the entrance and Gord related his adventure with the druid and Chert, involving a confrontation with a cataboligne demon. He told Deirdre of the malign foreboding and awful nightmares that accompanied proximity to the ancient ringstones and the crypt beneath the central cairn. While this place was dissimilar, Gord asserted he also felt a bad premonition here - different, but strong nonetheless.

For once, Deirdre didn't scoff. "I understand your rede, Gord… This is a place better left undiscovered," she whispered. "As soon as we gain our prize, I wish nothing more than to leave it as far behind as possible, and never will I speak of it to another!"

"Aye," Gord said in agreement, "but think on this: The relic which is the counterbalance to the greatest evil was warded by a demon. What fell things are set round that which serves Tharizdun?"

"Speak not that name!" Deirdre hissed. Her look showed fear, and her voice shook as she spoke. "Locked in nighted prison or not, I think he can somehow still know and respond when his name is spoken! Remember, the savants say that the powers of Evil still draw from the dream-force of that terrible one!"

Her vehemence startled Gord, but the young thief readily understood her point and agreed. In the past, he was not much given to theological considerations of any sort. But this was different. Gord had learned many new things over the past year or two, and now his horizons had expanded further. Deirdre's warning could not be ignored. "Yes," he said earnestly, "you are right to rebuke me. I shall not be so careless in the future! Tell me, where do you think we should begin our explorations this morning?"

They spoke in whispers for the remainder of Cord's watch, and the golden light of the sun came soon to call the whole party to its task.

Chapter 8

Malign hatred hung in the air. It seemed to permeate the great, ghastly hall in layers of palpable evil. The closer one came to the throne of silver-set human bones, the stronger the hatred and attendant fear became. Perhaps it was the air, filled as it was with the noxious fumes of ordure and other substances even more disgusting, which smoked in foetid lumps on the hot coals of the demon-figured bronze braziers fanned before the black dais.

If the stark city of Dorakaa was ugly and wicked, its palace was the nadir of such maleficence, and the reeking throne chamber its very pit. So tortuous its shapes, so horrific its decoration, so disgusting its every aspect, that few humans could remain sane within its confines. Men, and women too, were indeed therein, but of their sanity, who could speak? These dozen figures stood unmoving, heads slightly bent in deference, amid the waves of foul stench and washes of hatred. They awaited the word of their master, the occupant of the throne, the ruler of this place and all the landsaround . . . the great Iuz.

"Well? . . ." The question hung in the thick air. The rasping wheeze that voiced it - a sound of bone on slate, rusted iron drawn over splintered wood - somehow seemed to go on as if the moment would continue into eternity until the query was answered. A tall, emaciated man raised his eyes to the figure seated on the skull-ridden throne. A wizened old man sat there, a wrinkled, ancient figure whose eyes glowed with insane fires. These eyes locked upon those of the thin, tall mage, and the latter spoke quickly. "I ... we . . . have no success, Lord of Eldritch Evil." Hastening on before he could be interrupted, and being careful to avoid his master's baleful stare, the mage added, "Even with our combined powers, Lord Iuz, the opposition is too great - "

"Silence!" Somehow, the thin wheeze mat sounded this word shook each of the group who stood before the grim throne. The mage who was speaking when the command came had his jaws slammed shut, and his form twitched as if shaken by a giant, invisible terrier.

"How dare you tell me you cannot succeed!" The old figure trembled too, but with fury, and the wattles and wrinkles turned from gray to livid purple with the emotion. "You belittle the might of Iuz when you fail, and that is a crime which I punish in a manner so as to make death longed for!" With that, die horrible old man spat deliberately. The bead of spittle struck the

quivering mage full in the forehead, and the thin magic-user dropped as if struck by a hammer.

" Iuz will nor bend his knee to anyone! Cursed be the Hierarchs and their diabolical masters! Twice cursed be those red-gowned nigglings who call themselves the Scarlet Brotherhood! Thrice damned to everlasting and tormented sleep be their Dark One, the one to bind all Evil together... never!" He paused in his tirade, looking from one to the other of the men and women before him, spell-casters all, whether magical or clerical. The one who lay still was the least amongst their number. These were the dregs of humanity - corrupt, evil, pitiless, deceitful, utterly without morals or virtue - but powerful and capable. Each bowed lower as the gaze of the master touched him or her, but each held his or her own hate and hubris up as a shield against the foul assault of Iuz's eyebite. This reaction pleased and amused the wizened ancient one into a fit of ghastly cackling.

"You are right," he said after the insidious laughter finally left him. " Iuz is proud of such filth as you, for the Dukes of the Nine Hells would shudder at your powers and the minds which command them, but I am Iuz, I command, and you obey!

"Now, gather up that lump of dogshit before My throne, or I shall burn him as I do other offal, and he would make a pretty stench, I think. . . . And then you will call upon your utmost and accomplish what is needed! I care not how - do it! Sacrifice every virgin you can find, call up those demons bound to you, utilize any force necessary, but succeed. You have until tomorrow at this time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ancient Lord," they intoned in chorus.

"Tomorrow, then. Great as your reward for success will be, worse still the exaction for failure. Depart!"

Iuz watched the eleven slowly back from the chamber, one of their number using the dweomer of her staff to draw the comatose mage with them. When they were beyond the massive bronze-sheathed valves that allowed entrance to the audience hall, the portals slammed shut at his wave, while several of the dretch who served as lackeys scudded hurriedly to avoid being crushed. One was too slow, and the massive doors decapitated it as they closed. Iuz stayed still for a moment, enjoying the sight of the headless body of the demonling flopping about. Other dretches quickly removed it though, slobbering up the gore as they did so. Iuz chuckled, but this time in a bass tone that resonated through the stone chamber. His

loutish servants hunched their gross bodies closer to the flags of the floor at this. In seconds all were gone from view. The cruel mirth boomed forth again, and then Iuz arose from his massive chair of bones, skulls, silver, and gems. He now stood well over seven feet tall, and his features were unquestionably demoniac. It was time for him to visit his seraglio.

Iuz had many concubines - human, semi-human, and demon-spawn as well. Who could say which he enjoyed most - beautiful, or horrifyingly malformed and ugly? Mammalian or reptilian? Iuz was a cambion, after all, the bastard son of a demon mated with a woman. In him, the worst of demon and human had combined to form the Ancient One, The Old, Iuz, Lord of Evil. He was full of hatred and malign purpose, and several hours spent desporting himself in the seraglio only served to increase his tension. Perverse and sadistic pleasures had served no purpose in this regard. Iuz silently cursed all, as was his habit. It seemed as if many great beings and powerful persons had conspired directly against him of late - the last century, in actual time, but to Iuz this was lately. While there was a certain sense of pride gained from this, a recognition of Iuz's true merit, as it were, the combination had harmed him nonetheless.

First his mother, Iggwilv, had turned against him, then disappeared. It was with her help that he had gained his realm, and she had promised to aid in its expansion. Well, rot her! Then, Graz'zt, disease rot his vitals, had been removed from his ken too. Graz'zt, Iuz's dear father - Iuz sneered at the thought - had actually done for his mother, and thus done for a portion of his son's immediate ambitions. Well, what would come next was yet to be seen. . . .

As if that weren't enough, Iuz himself had been tricked by an unmentionable being - and imprisoned! He, Iuz! It had taken many years to manage an escape, because the one who confined him was so irrational that no normal reasoning could break the bonds, but break free he did - only to find the lickspittle servants of Hades and Tarterus lording it over a portion of his realm. Yes, these demodand-kissing little humans and their masses of ranked fireball fodder had proclaimed the eastern half of Iuz, His Realm, as theirs.

Being weakened from die long imprisonment, and needing to regroup his followers and gather more, Iuz had had to smile and show friendship. Yes, he loved it when the "Dreaded Hierarchs" made Molag, His Molag, summer capital of the Realm, their scat of power. Of course! He was pleased that

their so-called Horned Society was there to combat the stinking fools who served good - after all, he had been detained elsewhere, hadn't he? Someone had to carry on the fight! When former allies swore fealty to the Hierarchs, Iuz had never reproached them. Never! That would have bespoken possible enmity, and Iuz was on good terms with all those who served Evil, wasn't he? Of course, he was anything but! But he needed to gain strength, and time.

Then his dear lady, Queen Zuggtmoy, came and joined with him. Together they would bring all Oerth under his rule, spread her pets over its surface, and jointly take their pleasure there, or on Zuggtmoy's plane in the Abyss. After all, there would be time then for planning new conquests, on other worlds and planes. But, as with Iggwilv, Graz'zt, and even himself, the demoness too was stripped from his ken, and foes pressed him from all sides. Iuz knew which beings, and humans too, were responsible, and one day they would be called to account .

Even stripped as he was of allies and friends, Iuz was by no means without resources. Foremost among them, naturally, were his own mighty intellect and powers. Then he had his servants, numbering in the tens of thousands - humans, demi-humans, humanoids, and even a number of major demons - although he distrusted most of the latter, for they either spied for Graz'zt or merely sought to curry favor without promising any real assistance. The drow were of some help. These dark elves had abandoned all service of the supposed Elemental Evil - that had been his and Queen Zuggtmoy's ploy anyway. To imagine that anyone could swallow the concept still caused Iuz to laugh with fiendish delight! What was more chaotic indeed than the ravening elements? At least a quarter of these nighted drow now served Iuz, much to the dismay of their mighty demoness mistress. Although Iuz did not wish to anger her - for the time for such confrontation was later - he did need those dark elves. Bandits and humanoid dregs were fine, but real power was in his hands, and the hands of those exceptional humans and demi-humans who had dedicated themselves to his service.

Iuz knew full well that there were men and women of great talent and power. Their might was such that they could challenge the rulers of the lower planes. Such of these as he could gather he cherished in his own and degrading way. Six of the greatest he had, and six just a little lesser, and six others beside that. Each of the first two groups knew of each other, but of

the last six they knew nothing, just as each one in that latter group knew nothing of the others. As the first and second sixes worked and wrought as Iuz willed, the others did his bidding as well, only without any knowledge save their master's. Somewhere in the wide Flanaess were a human, a dwarf, an elf, a gnome, a halfling, and a half-elf, each supposing that he or she alone was a secret servant of the Lord of Ancient Evil.

Now each had a special mission to fulfill. Iuz took no chances. Still in the tall, fat demoniac form - perhaps his true one - Iuz passed through a secret panel and descended a worn flight of steps. The labyrinth beneath his palace was extensive, but few, if any, besides the ancient cambion knew its full extent. After a time he came to a natural grotto, a place worn by water from the limestone. It was one of his favorite places, for the shapes formed by the slowly dripping water had made grotesqueries. Iuz had added his own touches, so that now the place resembled a nightmare world. He loved it. Calcified bodies writhed in stony agony, things leered, disgusting acts were committed to slowly evolving fruition by carefully channeled water. Here, he and Zuggtmoy had spent much time, and she had created a fungi garden unparalleled in nature. Its revolting colors, forms, and scents were even disquieting to Iuz at times . . . marvelous! Now, however, there were visitors occupying this secret garden, as it were.

"Welcome, Lord Iuz," piped a voice from nearby. Three small drow stepped back, bowing. These were priests of Graz'zt, inconsiderable nothings, as were the three magic-users who rounded out the male contingent of the dark elves. There were also a pair of female clerics and the female leader of the embassy. These two likewise bowed to Iuz, informing him that their mistress was expecting him.

There, in a small, richly furnished alcove, was Eclavdra, ambassador to the Court, and leader of the Eilserv Clan and all those drow who followed it.

"You look well, Lord," the beautiful Eclavdra said sweetly in her lilting soprano voice as she idly plucked another leg from a huge spider she had pinned to a table with a slender stilletto. "Your loving father sends you his greetings."

"Leave off the mockery, Eclavdra, and cease that foolishness with the eight-legger. I have things of import to discuss!"

The beautiful dark elf laughed the crudest laugh Iuz had been treated to in too long a time. "No mockery, Lord of Evil . . . see?" Eclavdra thrust her

lovely, ebon arm before the scissoring mandibles of the pain-wracked black widow. Instantly, the creature closed its jaws and pumped its venom, but instead of the expected result, the great spider suddenly released its hold, uttering a screeching chitter in terrible agony as it did so, and visibly disintegrated to a bubbling, soupy mass of foulness before Iuz's surprised gaze.

"The Mighty Graz'zt, your father, has bestowed a small favor upon me, Lord Iuz," she explained as she hungrily enjoyed the last of the putrefaction on the table, "and has likewise given me advice to pass along to his . . . son."

Iuz ground his sharp-pointed teeth at the studied insult, but he forced a smile and cocked one eyebrow in inquiry. Although this made his countenance more ghastly and demoniacal than ever, Eclavdra seemed unaffected. "Mighty Graz'zt has recently triumphed, and now fully three layers of the Abyss are at the Prince's command. In celebration, Mighty Graz'zt has granted amnesty to your mother Iggwilv. Provided she obeys, he will loose her to aid his son's cause here on Oerth."

"What?!" This was astounding news. Iuz interjected the question as much to use magic to determine the truth of what this drow high priestess was saying as to express his incredulity.

"My words are not false, Lord of Evil," Eclavdra said with her beautiful, wicked smile. "But hear me out, for there is much more."

"Speak on then, dark elf female, but remember that you speak to Iuz!"

"And Lord Iuz must remember that he speaks to the Chosen of Graz'zt!" Eclavdra returned in icy warning. "Let us leave that aside, for it is both as Ambassador of all true dark elves and as High Priestess of Mighty Graz'zt that I apprise you now. Those who rule the Abyss are alerted to the danger which faces them all. None would serve as underlings of that One Who We Will Not Name, but most will agree to no joint plan of action. The two who claim greatest lordship tear at each other and your father, and with them fully a third of the others align - as suits their purposes - and the balance tilts. A certain few have aligned with Mighty Graz'zt, however, and with success here, your father knows others will follow. This, then, is what he charges his son with.

"You are to make no attempt to contact your mother, Iggwilv, until she has accomplished her task. Before you object, Graz'zt wishes you to know that your mother is charged with finding and freeing Queen Zuggtmoy -

providing that she, Lady of Fungi, accepts the overlordship of Graz'zt and agrees to assist you in conquest of this world."

As Eclavdra made this last statement, Iuz's mind was racing. . . . So, Graz'zt thought to subjugate the Abyss through extraordinary means! Iuz had to admire the temerity of his father. If Zuggtmoy were forced to swear allegiance to him, Graz'zt would not only expand his territory but the impact on his influence would be tenfold. Every demon lord and lady would have to think carefully about incurring the enmity of so powerful a combination. Already Yeenoghu, the Demon Lord of Gnolls, was allied with Graz'zt.

Iuz grinned, knowing that allegiances could be broken as readily as sworn to. Let his Lady Zuggtmoy swear, and with her, Iggwilv too; none could stand before his conquest of this entire planet. The time was ripe for it, after all. The regimented and bureaucratic Hierarchs had embroiled their Horned Society in a useless war with the Free Lords of the Bandit Kingdoms, while the strutting, posturing minions of the Scarlet Brotherhood puffed themselves up with dreams of ruling all under the benighted power of That One Who Must Slumber Everlastingly. As fragmented as the forces of the Abyss were, their very nature made them unpredictable, while their numbers were undeniably equal to all others who opposed them, Good and Evil alike. Those fools who sought neutral balance would never commit themselves in time to prevent Iuz's mantle of empire from covering all Oerth! Then, oh yes, then, Iuz would show "Mighty Graz'zt," and others too, who was true Lord of All!

Iuz's penetrating stare had been fixed upon Eclavdra as his mind raced over the prospects of what she had said. Whether this gaze had made her pause, or whether she was waiting for a reply before continuing, Iuz could not guess, although the dark elf s jet-black complexion seemed a trifle paler. Iuz decided to break the silence.

"That, dear high priestess," he said flatly, "is a revelation indeed. I must needs think on the import a time, but pray go on with your message as I ponder."

"Yes, Lord Iuz," Eclavdra said, with a hint of a trembling betrayed in the last note. She looked away for a moment and picked up a flagon formed from a small skull, chased with gold and bestudded with a rainbow of small gems. After draining its content of black liquor to the dregs, pretending thirst and dry throat from her speech, the drow cleric faced Iuz again, her

confidence restored. Dealing with this one, the greatest and most evil of all cambions, was trying. . . . Even with the ultimate knowledge that Graz'zt spoke through her.

"My lord," she continued, "your father charges you with location of one or both of the remaining portions of the Tripartite Artifact of All Evil. He says that the lickspittles of the Scarlet Brotherhood already hold that portion dear to the Abyss - and even now they seek the part which commands their ilk, those who sit astride the Dukes of Hell and think themselves the most fit. He orders you to gain it instead and pass it to me for conveyance to a place of safe-keeping which your father will determine."

Iuz detected her lie as she said this, and picked up an unguarded thought that told him she intended to use the portion of the artifact to bend all drow to her will - a counter to Iuz's own empire above!

Eclavdra studied the towering cambion's features for a hint of reaction, but Iuz only nodded thoughtfully, as if considering. "Mighty Graz'zt has many of his servants in and on Oerth searching for the location of that portion which rules ordered Evil. You are to join this effort, searching the southern realms midway between your own holding and that land ruled by the pale Suloise jackals in their red garments."

"I see," murmured Iuz softly. "And is there more from my caring progenitor?"

Eclavdra swallowed, but set her sculpted features firmly and replied. "The New Master of the Abyss commands your absolute obedience and the faithful fulfillment of his instructions. Failure will mean the end of your domain here - your death! Mighty Graz'zt promises that his son, and Iggwilv, and the demoness Zuggtmoy too, will meet utter destruction at his hands should you fail in your mission! Before he will bow to the Ultimate Sleeper, those instruments which have failed his purpose will be removed from existence to lessen his humiliation. That is all."

Iuz rose to his full height, looming over the seated drow as a giant above a halfling. Rage flushed his reddish complexion to a maroon color that a pit fiend would have been proud to possess. His pea-green eyes fairly burned, and he trembled with suppressed fury. Now Eclavdra reacted, recoiling from the massive figure in fear for her life, hastily trying to prepare some defense against his impending assault.

His eyes froze her before she could begin the somatic gestures of her incantation. One long, sinewy finger pointed its black, talon-tipped length at

her, and the high priestess of Graz'zt forgot her exalted master and his aegis. Eclavdra dropped to her knees in front of him and clasped her hands before her in supplication. Before she could utter any pleading, Iuz himself spoke.

"Never, never again speak to me as an equal," he hissed through his clenched, needlelike teeth. "That position is appropriate," he continued, as he grasped Eclavdra by her silken, white tresses and forced her head further back, so that the drow had no choice but to meet his burning gaze squarely. "If needs be, you may stand before me, head bowed, but I find this more pleasing for many reasons. . . . Yes, I see you understand! Now you listen as I tell you what your reply to Graz'zt is to be. I speak as equal to equal, not as son to father, nor as lesser to greater. I will aid Graz'zt against his enemies, just as he will aid me against mine, as one king makes pact with another. Graz'zt's realm and my own are separated, different. We shall both profit from a mutual success, and neither threatens the other.

"Tell him that - and inform him also that I am many leagues ahead of him! Already have I sussed out" - and Iuz's laughter here was awful as he threw his head back at the play on words and allowed peals of demoniac glee to roll from his throat - "the whereabouts of the second portion of the key to the prison of that One Who Must Never Awaken!" He paused to eye the kneeling drow cleric, then continued.

"Tell my concerned parent that even now one of my own loyal servants carries it to me! Tell him that he commands neither me nor mine, does Graz'zt. I shall retain the eldritch object in My possession, and I shall otherwise do as I think best - of course, always in the interest of furthering the ultimate ends of our . . . alliance.

"Lastly, inform the Prince of the Abyss that I shall seek out my mother. I shall aid her mission. I shall personally welcome Zuggtmoy to our alliance, and because of this I shall take responsibility for her complete agreement and cooperation. Cooperation amongst equals! Remember that, drow - equals. Now finish your work, and hurry off to pass this message, this whole encounter, back to Graz'zt where he must remain fixed for decades yet, upon the layers he rules in the great Abyss."

The high priestess arose and hurried off, not daring to utter any reply. Iuz's malign laughter rolled after her. Eclavdra ignored it, vowing to have her vengeance in due course upon the fat, red pig who called himself Lord of Evil.

Iuz, meanwhile, was thinking of the day to come when he would show his loving father the true worth of his offspring, and would do so in terms that left no uncertainty as to who was in shadow, who in glory! This did not distract him from the object of his current desire, the determination of just how successful his minions were in their mission. Iuz dared not scry often, nor employ great powers, in tracking or assisting them, for to do so was sure to draw the attention of those who served Hades, Hell, and those multitudes on the lower planes who sought the revival of Tharizdun. He shook in anger even thinking the name, for it brought fear to him, and Iuz dared not speak the cursed syllables of that one's name aloud. He used one of his black-gowned magic-users to discover the information needed. This too frustrated Iuz, but expediency was bearable - for the nonce.

Soon the Lord of Evil stood guised in his ancient form while the six of greatest standing performed their duties. A large pool of inky blackness rippled and shimmered, and before his eyes there swam the scene he desired to view.

Chapter 9

Gord muttered an obscenity as a loose rock bruised and abraded his fingers. "This is no way to treat the hands of a skilled artist," he continued as Deirdre gave him a quizzical look.

It was nearly noon, and the sun was hot. Gord, for one, was tired, but the work had to go on. They had discovered signs of the disturbance - the recent disturbance - of a three-tiered structure. This building stood on a low mound in about the center of the peninsula, so overgrown that from any distance it appeared to be nothing more than a small hill. Up close it was revealed as a large building, probably a temple of some sort. Part of the building's north face had been collapsed by the intruders, who then used a few small plants and much dead brush to hide the fact from casual observation. Of course, Gord and his group had easily noted the tampering once they were close enough to realize the building was there. Now all save the party's sentries were working to clear away the landslide to find what lay beyond.

Deirdre and Incosee levered out a large stone block, allowing gravity to clear it once it was free of the rubble. It rolled and bumped down the hillside, landing amidst the other debris they had sent the same way. Moon gave a shout, for although a shower of smaller rocks and bits of broken stone had cascaded into the place the squared-off block had been, a small opening was visible beyond. They had uncovered the entrance to the place at last!

"Don't stand and gape, Gord!" shouted Deirdre. "Lend a hand here, and we'll soon find what's within!" Matching her enthusiastic urging with action, the girl began to clear rubble away from the small opening with gusto. The head-sized chunks of building stone fairly flew behind her in a stream as she grabbed and pitched them between her legs. Gord and Incosee joined in, and after about a quarter-hour they were replaced by Moon, Patrick, and Blonk. Then the task was taken up by the three novice druids, Grover, Lorman, and Ash.

The whole operation was supervised by Curley Greenleaf s watchful eye - watching amid jibes about laziness and letting others do the real work. Recalling the cairn and the cataboligne demon, Curley simply ignored all comments and demanded that the opening be large enough for at least two persons to pass through easily with no danger of further block* age from rubble above. The third shift finished the task, and the guards were called

in. Soon Gellor, Jokotai, and Oscar were gathered with the others, and the adventurers devised a plan.

The half-elven druid cast an illusion over the place so that it appeared to be a thick stand of trees. Unless they actually entered, observers would see nothing else, for the dweomer hid the torn vegetation and the jumble of material they had cleared from the temple's entrance. Curley Greenleaf, Gellor, and Gord would precede the rest into the building, for all three had ability to see in the blackness of the place without benefit of light. Blonk, Jokotai, and the three aspirants would remain behind to guard the entrance and watch for possible enemies. Oscar, Deirdre, and Incosee would follow with Pa-trick and Moon bearing lanterns to illuminate their way, after giving the three advance members of the group sufficient time to get well ahead of them. If the scouting group discovered any trouble, they would send word back immediately, and whatever action was called for could then be taken. To assure easy communication with the rear guard, the three aspiring druids would be strung out in a line after the center group, each within calling distance of the next, so that information could be passed quickly in a hushed voice a hundred feet to or from the entrance, if the need arose.

The advance party saw signs of disturbance in the corridor. A large group had passed through the entry and into the building not many days before. Gellor didn't like this at all, nor did Curley, but there was nothing to do but press on and learn what these prior entrants had done. The place was a maze, but Gellor, with his strange, enchanted "eye" in place, was able to follow the path of the preceding group without difficulty, noting where they had backtracked and thus enabling his group to avoid unnecessary detours. As planned, the three left signs on the walls whenever they reached a place where two or more choices were possible. Gord used his magical dagger to chisel the guide marks into the temple's stone walls.

Eventually they reached a square chamber in the center of the second tier of the structure, a place that could be entered only by means of a secret stair leading down from the partially collapsed upper level of the temple. The chamber was scarred by fire and lightning, its contents were strewn in a litter of broken and burned parts, and several corpses made the air foul.

"There is no magic here!" exclaimed Gellor. "Yet there remains a powerful and dark aura surrounding that great center block," he said, pointing at what was undoubtedly an altar stone.

The three moved to inspect the object closely. Before they had completed their work, the yellow glow of flaming lanterns filled the chamber as Deirdre, Oscar, and the others in the center group joined them. The light made the examination much easier for Gord. They were able to determine that something supernatural had been here, and had been destroyed. The outline of some monstrous creatures was etched on the stone floor in three places, indicating that at least that number of the things had been destroyed by those who had entered before.

"Guardian daemons," Gellor commented under his breath as he observed the three smirches.

"Here, look at these bodies!" Gord called. He pointed to the remains of creatures of more usual sort - four dead humans, charred by fire but discernible as men nonetheless. There were also two other humans, one disemboweled, the other dismembered. There were broken weapons and some other equipment scattered about also.

"No telling who they were," commented Greenleaf, peering at the remains. "From the look of it they served no master and were probably nothing other than free adventurers or mercenaries."

"I think not, my friend," called Gellor. The bard had been searching the edges and corners of the chamber, and he stepped back into the pool of light shed by the lanterns with several objects in his hand. "Look here. This is certainly a magicked arrow of elven sort, and this bow is likewise one of elvish manufacture. Now this . . ." he added, placing a hammer among the rest, "... this is unquestionably made for and sized to dwarven hands. I can't say positively, but I believe that there are signs of a gnome's presence as well. What does this mean to you?"

"Strange weapons for a band of mercenaries," noted Deirdre.

"Exactly," Gellor said, nodding. "Not to mention that their wielders were probably demi-humans. Still, these are the only traces that the invaders of this ancient temple were other than human adventurers - I thought that work blocking the entrance showed unusual skill."

"I follow your line of reasoning, Gellor," Curley said, looking from the assortment of evidence to the surrounding litter. "Oscar, see what you can discover about what prize those daemons warded while I find if there is more to support our one-eyed detective's deductions."

While those two were going about their respective tasks, the others assisted Gellor in minutely searching the whole place once again, being

careful to avoid getting in the druid's way. Eventually the whole was done. The magic-user could discover little more than what Gellor had already found. Something powerful had been here, and a bit of its aura remained, intermixed with the malign essence of the altar stone. All concluded that the object protected by this place and its guardian daemons had probably been the portion of the artifact that they sought.

Greenleaf had found an ancient, pitted silver coin, wedge-shaped, bearing a "T" on one side and a reversed pyramid on the other. It was partially lodged within a crack near the stairway leading up, and its exposed edge bore shiny marks showing recent abrasion. There was only one probable answer; The intruders had consisted of a mixed group of humans, elves, dwarves, and possibly gnomes as well. They had managed to destroy the guardians of the temple, sack the place, and make off with the portion of the artifact and other loot as well. In the process, this group had been careful both to make discovery of their work difficult to uncover and to take precautions to mislead anyone who did find that they had been to the ruin, disguising their expedition to appear to have been a party of humans, bandits, or looting adventurers.

"This seems very bad," Gellor said. "They are days - perhaps weeks - gone, and we have no idea who they are or where they went."

"Not weeks, Gellor, that I can assure you," replied the druid. "Unless I am totally inept, they were here only days ahead of us, and after their battle with those daemons, I'd guess they traveled slowly for a few days. There are ways to find the route they took and what direction they are heading - risky, under the circumstances, but we must take the chance! The fate of all Oerth hangs in the balance, I fear."

"Oh, yes," agreed Oscar. "Whoever was here before us served the cause of Evil, that is certain, but perhaps they are not as attuned to the oneness of the cause as we think. . . ."

Gellor slapped his palm. "Of course! Excellent thinking, mage! If these fellows had been agents of the Scarlet Brotherhood, surely they would have had some means of placating those guardian daemons, leaving them intact to surprise others, and they could carry off the artifact's part without conflict. Come on, let's leave this stinking death chamber and return to the sunlight. There's much work to be done!" The eight departed in a group, hurrying to clear the ruin and begin their preparations to discover what they could about those who had taken the object of their quest.

What they discovered first was the dead body of Lorman, sprawled face down in the corridor, killed by a single sword-thrust from behind. Forty or fifty feet nearer the entrance they discovered Ash, his throat cut. Grover likewise had been murdered where he had stood between Ash and the doorway. Of Blonk and Jokotai there was no sign.

"There!" called Incosee, as they emerged from the ruin and swept the surrounding area with their gaze. "In the bush ... to the right . . . see the foot?" No question, a booted foot protruded from a small clump of brush down the sloping hillside.

Hurrying there, they discovered the motionless, mutilated body of the Chakyik nomad. There were wounds on both his back and front, and nearby were signs of a melee. Jokotai apparently had been attacked from behind, survived the initial assault, and fought with his assailant for several minutes before being slain.

"He was a tough one, Jokotai," observed Gord. "The one who slew him had already half-killed him with a stroke in the back."

"Only Blonk remains unaccounted for - and I think we all know why," said Deirdre, pale-faced but with iron in her voice.

The bard and the druid conferred for a moment, then began a rapid search of the surrounding area. Soon Gellor came up with a tattered roll of parchment, and showed it to Curley Greenleaf and the others in turn.

"Here is what I surmise happened," Gellor said. "Jokotai was tricked into coming outside, and then he was attacked by the vile chameleon, Blonk, who had used this scroll to cast a spell of silence upon himself. The blow wasn't sufficient to kill so doughty a barbarian as the Chakyik, but he was sorely wounded before he had a chance to fight. Still, he got in his strokes - see the stains upon his tulwar? Blonk, still dweomered to be able to move with no sound, then picked off the three unsuspecting sentinels. What was his purpose for all this? Now my reasoning becomes nearly pure conjecture, but see if this does not follow," Gellor said.

"If we had discovered the next piece of the tripartite artifact, Blonk planned to somehow wrest it from us. The means had to be magical, not based on strength and weapon play, for one against eight is impossible odds, especially given our arts and skills. Blonk's masters, certainly the Scarlet Brotherhood, must have supplied him with the wherewithal - a scroll containing a time-cessation spell, perhaps, to be followed up with

some means of sealing us into the treasure chamber, permanently or at least long enough for that foul bastard to make good his escape.

"I suppose that Blonk crept soundlessly after us once he had killed the druids. But involved as we all were with our examination of the place, none noticed him. It is likely, after all, that the swine was cloaked by invisibility as well. Once he was with us, he must have overheard all we discussed, stolen back, and even now rides with all of our steeds to inform his associates of what has happened!"

As the grizzled bard spoke the last words, the rest suddenly thought of the horses. As Gellor had guessed, all of the animals were gone. Neither man nor mount was in sight, so the assassin had a solid head start, and with the party afoot, Blonk was not likely to be caught.

"What now?" asked Gord and Deirdre in near unison.

"What else than that which we were planning anyway," Greenleaf stated flatly. "Oscar, now you must employ your arts to determine the direction taken by those who preceded us and gained the object of our quest - though I'll stake my life it wasn't toward the Pomarj ... or any other rendezvous with minions of the Scarlet Sign!"

Oscar nodded and withdrew, Deirdre accompanying him, for the dangerous business of casting a divination that involved beings not of this plane. All the others save the druid and Gellor were given sectors to watch, so that while the dweomercrafting was taking place no enemy could approach undetected. Curley Greenleaf and his old friend, likewise schooled in the arts of nature and its associated powers, would seek to become one with the surrounding land, to learn who had passed, who approached, what lurked hidden from normal view. Before an hour had passed, Gellor's low whistle alerted the four sentries to return to the cleared area where the others had been at work.

"We learned, Curley and I," said Gellor, "that a group of bipeds were here some days back and went many miles to the northwest. The murderous Blonk and our horses crossed the Jewel to the south of us, reached the other bank safely, and are now some five miles distant, with many, many others there. Even now, this multitude comes toward us, although the river stands between. There is a deep cavern north of here, a place carved by nature, and within it lairs an ancient green dragon of monstrous size and greatest evil. As Greenleaf discovered this, we both sensed it stir and rouse itself. We fear that it has been contacted and urged into action somehow, probably by those

who come against us." Here the one-eyed adventurer paused and looked at Curley. "Is there more, old friend? Or did I relate it all?"

"You said all truly and exactly - as a bard should!" the druid answered. Then he turned to Oscar, inquiring, "And you, spell-caster of Hardby?"

"Our quarry speeds northward," the mage began, "after leaving the Suss for open lands in Celene. There seems to be some dissension in their midst, for they make first northwest, as if heading for Enstad - incredible as that may seem - then north and northeast for the Kron Hills or Welkwood. They do indeed have the portion of the artifact, though it is heavily protected and hidden. More about them - their master, or their ultimate destination - I could not learn."

"Well done!" said Curley. "We know that they have the prize, are not yet at the boundary of Celene, and the general direction of their flight. It is heartening indeed, and all we could expect. Thanks, boon companion and artful mage."

Oscar, always somewhat shy, simply lowered his gaze a bit and shrugged as the others smiled and congratulated him. Gellor interrupted the scene after a few seconds.

"Save this for another time, comrades," he said. "We are in dire jeopardy - a dragon comes, and unknown foes seek our lives! Let us set our minds on the perils of our mission and save the accolades for the time of final success."

"Correct as usual," noted Curley Greenleaf. "Here, stand round me a moment. I must needs touch each of you " He began an almost inaudible chant, gesturing and occasionally bringing forth some bit of leaf or berry, then bits of wood. About halfway through the incantation, the druid began touching each of his associates in turn, on the forehead, the hand, and the stomach.

Gord had never been so included in dweomercrafting, and he was slightly uneasy, perhaps a bit frightened, but he determined not to allow the others to see this, just as he always carefully masked all of his emotions. Whatever was to come, he knew it was meant to help, not harm, him and the others. It had better be something powerful, Gord thought, for otherwise there might be no future for any of them, not just Jokotai, Ash, Grover, and poor little Lorman.

The half-elven priest of nature had completed his touching and was walking away from them. His chant rose to a shout, and as he uttered the

cry, Greenleaf threw his hands wide, sweeping them above his head in a near-magnificent gesture. The area darkened for a split second, then grew terribly bright, just as a resounding clap of thunder nearly broke Gord's eardrums and left him reeling. Blinking and trying to shake the ringing from his ears, the young thief saw something totally unexpected.

The clearing was now occupied by a pair of huge, fiery horses. These tawny, flame-coated steeds, with molten hooves and nostrils that showered burning sparks, were hitched to a large, clumsy-looking chariot likewise fashioned of living fire! With a bound, the druid was upon the vehicle, gesturing and calling to the others.

"Don't stand there gawking, friends! Enemies abound, and this will draw them faster than before. Hurry! Jump aboard, and let us be away with all haste!"

Gellor, Oscar, and even Deirdre complied instantly. The rest, including Gord, hung back. All could feel the heat, see the licking tongues of flame eating the surrounding vegetation, even though it was green and moist. How those on the flaming chariot survived was unknown to them, but surely the fire would consume them if they were so stupid as to climb into that inferno. Then Deirdre stepped down, grabbed Gord by his hand, and led the reluctant thief aboard the vehicle. Widi that, the other three followed - Incosee first, then Moon followed by Patrick. Even before that last worthy's feet were firmly aboard the chariot, Curley Greenleaf shouted words in some strange language. In response, the blazing horses pawed the ground, shot forth blasts of fire, and leaped ahead and upward. In seconds the whole group was borne into the air, the chariot trailing smoke and flames in its wake.

The druid somehow managed to guide the horses without benefit of reins or whip. They pulled the incandescent chariot ever upward and toward the northwest. Gord found he could grasp the red-glowing, flame-covered sides of the vehicle without pain or damage from the strange and wondrous fire it was composed of. Gellor saw his wonderment and told the young adventurer, in a shout that carried over the wind of their passage, that had not Greenleaf enabled this, Gord would even now be cinders and trailing ash. Then there was no more time for idle talk, for the druid commanded that all keep an eye out for possible attack.

The chariot was traveling at a speed the fastest of falcons would be hard-pressed to match, but magic was magic, and Gord obeyed the instruction to

be on guard. He surveyed the land below, its features slowly growing smaller as the vehicle was drawn ever higher by the burning stallions. The Jewel appeared to be a narrow, silvery ribbon only inches wide, while the swamp and trees were merely bumpy colors. Hill and cliff were discernible only by light and shadow patterns, Gord noted. Depths were impossible to judge from a height such as this. He was exhilarated by the whole experience, and had there been no impending threat of attack, he would have thought this whole episode one of the grandest moments of his entire life.

"There!" shouted Patrick, his voice nearly carried away by the howling rush of their passage. "Below and to the right a bit! Something dark wings upward toward us."

Curley Greenleaf peered in the direction the frightened mercenary pointed. Sure enough, there was a great, winged thing coming their way, a creature nearly invisible against the mottled greens of the landscape below. He said between the tearing gusts of wind, "That's the biggest godsdamned greenie I've ever seen, an ancient moss-back. Look! Its wing-spread must be eighty or ninety feet! It is rising fast, too. , . ."

"Aye," shouted Gellor in reply. "Turn these flaming brutes around, and let's get away from that monstrous blaster! Big and fast as he may be, no dragon alive can keep up with this chariot."

The druid complied, calling in his strange tongue to the burning horses. They obeyed instantly, curving leftward and climbing ever higher but in a direction opposite that of the dragon.

"Wait, see there!" cried Oscar. Ahead was a spiraling flock of winged specks, accompanied by some horselike shapes. This group was arising from the eastern side of the Jewel River, winging upward and in the same direction the flaming chariot was heading. They were caught between the largest of dragons and a horde of unknown foes.

Greenleaf urged the steeds again, and they turned so that they tore through the air in a course nearly due west, no longer climbing but moving straight ahead more than a thousand feet above the ground. This left the swarming specks out of the chase, it seemed, but the green dragon had other ideas. Its huge wings bore it up with amazing speed, and it was flying so as to cut the distance between itself and the intended prey, coming upward on a steep, sharp angle. The chariot drew ahead, but the dragon rose higher

than the vehicle and kept on climbing. Gord saw that the monster was angling now to be on a beeline behind them.

"The smart old bastard's going to dive!" screamed Gellor. "Beware!"

Sure enough, the colossus was hundreds of feet above them now. Its wings were angled, its head a streamlined shaft of destruction. It swooped down and ahead, falling as an avalanche toward the chariot and its straining steeds. Worse still, it was now also apparent that some creature, a man in all probability, sat astride the verdigris-hued scales of the great worm.

It was likewise Gellor who detected another terrible fact. "Save your lesser spells!" the bard trumpeted in his best stentorian voice so that all could hear. "I see the glow of a magical sphere surrounding both dragon and rider. If you have nothing else to do now, pray!"

Gord didn't notice what the others were doing, but he had pulled forth his sling and loaded one of his few oblong shots of lead and silver into the pouch. Even as Gellor was crying his warning and advice, the young thief was leaning so as to be able to whirl the thonged bullet faster and faster above his head. The titanic green dragon was closing, and its rider seemed to be readying some attack of his own, but this did not stop Gord. If he was about to die, then he would certainly go with as furious a resistance as circumstances allowed. Nevermore would he be one to cringe or despair. With a final effort, Gord spun the sling to blurring speed and released the heavy, enchanted missile. It sped straight and true toward its target. What effect it had Gord did not wait to learn, for he was already setting the second and last of his magic bullets into the sling.

As he cast the second bullet, the grandfather of green dragons was a mere hundred yards away and coming fast. Mouth wide in a hissing scream, huge foretalons outspread, it was evident that it was going to plummet upon the vehicle of flame, fire or no, and physically attack its occupants. The force of the impact, tons of dragon traveling faster than any horse could run, would shatter even so magical a carriage as this. One of the spell-workers threw up a brief, blazing curtain of fire between chariot and dragon, but the monster and its rider plunged through without seeming injury. Then the moment of truth came.

The hurtling body of the scaled monster rushed past the fiery chariot, missing a collision by only a few spans. The wind of its passage nearly toppled Gord from the precarious position he had taken up to sling missiles

at the enemy. The dragon was far below them in an instant, spreading its great wings and getting ready to come upward again in an arc.

"What happened?" shouted Gord over the roaring of their flight.

"Your last bullet took that fellow full on the head!" Greenleaf called back merrily. "I saw it all as if in slow motion - his helm saved him, but the impact set him reeling, and he must have jerked back on his reins. You've saved us!"

Sure enough, the dragon and its rider were too far behind now to ever catch the flying chariot. Gord silently thanked whatever had guided that second shot and allowed that little tug that sent the dragon just a few feet off target. Gellor gave him a nod of approval, and Incosee slapped him on the back. Ahead were the first signs of the elven community of Enstad, and soon they would be safely on the ground.

As they clambered down and the vehicle and strange steeds sputtered and vanished in a fizzling poof, Deirdre came up to Gord, grasped him by his lean shoulders, and planted a kiss full on his mouth. "I owe you my life," she said to the startled young thief. Then she spun on her heel and strode off to join the others. Gord strolled along, trailing behind his hurrying companions as they made for the torchlit gates of the capital of Celene. All this was a strange business, and he needed a bit of time to ponder events and settle his mind.

Chapter 10

A handful of yokels were pleading for their lives amid the smoking ruins of their thorp. As much to their own amazement as to that of the members of his company, Obmi signaled that the survivors were to be given quarter. One of the men either didn't see the signal, or else he simply chose to ignore it. Sneering, he thrust his sword into a little girl.

That was a mistake: A heavy hammer suddenly flashed through the air, and it struck the man's head with a sound reminiscent of a ripe melon hitting a stone floor. Shards of skull and bits of brain flew away with the hammer as the headless body flopped and jerked on the trampled, bloody earth.

Obmi caught the hammer as it returned to him and looked around at the scattered company. All were busily gathering up their booty, sheathing weapons, mounting up and readying for departure. Without comment or sign, the taciturn dwarf leader of the band slung the gory warhammer around the pommel of his saddle and rode out. His small stallion cantered away, leaving the sacked community on the edge of the Welkwood behind to the south. An uneven stream of other riders hastened after Obmi. There was no order to their march, but the weaker gave the stronger wide berth. Only two others rode near the dwarf.

Although he was hunted from the Crystalmist Mountains to Keoland, Obmi was virtually unknown to the reavers who followed him now. Keak and Gleed were the only ones in the group who were familiar with the jolly-looking, close-mouthed mountain dwarf, having accompanied Obmi for several years now. Keak was a tall, skinny high elf, fratricidal and murderous, adept with both spell and sword. Gleed, an aged-seeming gnome, was likewise a rogue and outlaw able to spin illusion or slit purse with equal skill. The lanky elf rode a gaunt horse, while the wizened gnome sat atop his own mount in a houdalike saddle. Keak was still snickering over the fate of the disobedient brigand and trying to get the squinty-eyed gnome to share his mirth.

"... and did you see his face when the hammer flew near?" Keak paused to cackle with glee at the thought. "It took him full in his sneering mouth, wiping that look away as cleanly as his teeth, face, and head! Heh, heh, heh!"

"Something less permanent might have done as well," was Gleed's only comment in reply. The gnome then spoke sharply to his ugly, jug-headed

mount, and the horse responded by increasing its pace to draw alongside the long-maned stallion ridden by the dwarf.

Keak likewise brought his animal to a faster gait, drawing up to ride at Obmi's left. "Most nobly done, Lord Obmi, most nobly!" he said to the ruddy-cheeked leader. "I was just sharing my admiration with the good gnome - but he seems less impressed with our leader's skill and authority than I," he finished, breaking into his usual cackle.

"Bah!" said Gleed. "Nobody cares what a crazy elf thinks about whether or not some useless man is brained."

Obmi's eyes twinkled as he looked from one to the other of his henchmen. "They need sport," he said, "and they need lessons, too. I give them both. Today there is no doubt who rules this company." As he said the last, Obmi's merry gaze traveled from Keak to Gleed. Both understood the message, for elf and gnome had seen the jolly countenance of the dwarf wreathed in smiles as he wrought the most malign deeds upon foes and disobedient friends alike. Obmi had power, and both of his lieutenants feared him. To provoke Obmi was to invite death.

"Fetch Red Bowman for me, Gleed," the dwarf said. "Keak, you move back too. Ride with your ilk. Make sure they remain steadfast."

Both of Obmi's henchmen muttered acquiescence and turned their mounts. Red Bowman was the leader of the score of humans who rode with the band, the remnants of a company of brigands that had numbered over fifty when they joined the demi-humans. Although the expedition had taken a heavy toll upon their number, the survivors were wealthy, and there was no grumbling or thought of desertion among them - none apparent, anyway. The wizened gnome shrugged and slowed his steed to a walk so that the others would catch up with him. Keak wheeled his gaunt horse around and rode back to where a half-score of various types of elves and half-elves rode together in a bunch. Near them were a handful of dwarves and gnomes riding ponies.

Keak took a position between the two groups and cackled, "Enough sport for you, lads?"

"When the hell do we get to someplace where we can have some real fun?" retorted one of the wild elves.

"Where the hell are we going, anyway?" asked one of the dwarves.

Laughing raucously, Keak told both lots that they should engage in anatomically impossible acts, but then he continued. "We'll be coming to

our destination soon enough, and then the boss will collect the big money. Your share'll make you rich for life!"

"I should live so long!" shouted the single high elfin the company.

"Keee, keee, khee!" snorted the lieutenant. "You won't if you keep talking like that . . . but, then, all the more for the rest of us!" The group looked blackly at the skinny, cackling elf, but then many of them grinned at the prospect of a larger share of treasure. The half-elf closed his mouth and kept it shut under Keak's wild glare. "Now, that's better. I'd say that tonight we'll be camping outdoors again, but tomorrow we should hit Hill Road and spend the night in Hommlet - good food and drink at the inn there, lads!"

"We'll take it all, and the women too!" agreed one of the riders.

"In a pig's ass you will, Stubbin," replied the stick-thin elf. "Obmi'tl want no such business close to Verbobonc. We are to pass as quietly through the border as possible, and that means we act like goody-goodies there."

Stubbin, a broad-shouldered mountain dwarf, made a rude gesture at Keak in reply, but he did not argue. If Keak said that (he boss wanted no trouble, then Stubbin had no desire to cross him. Obmi was one mean dwarf, and nobody to screw around with.

Nothing that saw them cared to molest so ugly a group as this company was, and just as predicted, they rode into the village of Hommlet at evening the next day. The Inn of the Welcome Wench, accustomed to accommodating caravans, easily housed their number. There were suspicious looks, but no one questioned their money. Horses were fed and rested while the company dined heartily and slept in soft beds. Next morning, Obmi haggled with a pair of traders for provisions and a half-dozen fresh horses. Then the company continued northward. They were watched by hard-eyed men-at-arms serving the local lord, but nobody cared to delay their departure.

Obmi was even more silent than usual, and he appeared haggard, as if a night spent in a feather bed was worse for him than one spent rolled in a blanket on the ground. Only the wicked dwarf knew the true cause of his condition. As he had slept, ebon tendrils had stolen into his brain - long, slender tentacles as insubstantial as fog yet strong as steel. The tendrils thickened and grew barbs that hurt cruelly, bringing him instantly awake and making him aware of what was happening, Iuz was in contact, and his master was not pleased with Obmi's performance! The dwarf grovelled

mentally as the rasping voice of the cambion spoke through the tendrils directly to his brain.

"Little fool!" Iuz shrieked mentally. "Your stupid meandering and pillaging has left so broad and easy a trail that even idiot puppets can follow! Do you have . . . it?" At this question, Obmi thought of the misshapen object he guarded so carefully. He did so without meaning to, but Iuz instantly caught the thought. "Good! Now I shall not have to waste a useful tool - you will live for a while yet, Obmi!"

Quivering in fear and rage, the dwarf sent a mental message in reply, while carefully masking the thoughts that lurked deeper within his mind. "Thank you, Lord of Evil, for your generosity. I am your servant to do with what you will. . . ."

"Enough!" interrupted Iuz. "I must hurry, for some great cloud is gathering, and in moments this contact will be broken. I can not see what is around you, but it is dangerous - powerful! Good lies nearby, but some friendly force as well, I think, for this force is obscured and hidden. Perhaps it is a trap set by those righteous weaklings who seek to oppose me. . . . No matter.

"Listen carefully, and do not fail me. Leave immediately, but do so without commotion. Go to Verbobonc, being careful to be open and seemingly carefree. Once well beyond the town, leave an obvious trail to the northeast, doing what you have done previously - robbing, murdering, raping, burning. It must seem that you are on your way to Molag, understand?"

"I understand, Lord," thought Obmi in reply.

The wisps within the dwarfs brain sent tingling pleasure through Obmi's body. "Excellent, my faithful servant! Do well, and your reward will be all you can ask" - and suddenly the tendrils were barbed and painful again - "but if you fail, such pain as this will seem a blissful reprieve from the torment you shall suffer! Now, stop cringing and attend my final instructions.

"Leave those clods who serve you to their fate. Divide when you reach the Att River. Send them on toward the lands of the Hierarchs, but you ride for your life northward. Enter the Vesve, and I will have an army there to greet you. This force will convey you in triumph to me in Dorakaa."

"But, Lord Iuz, how am I to convince them to . . ." Obmi let the mental question trail off, for the tendrils were gone from his brain. He could sense

that he was alone within his head. Hatred mixed with fear poured from the dwarfs mind, helping him to blank out the headache that the contact had caused. He said aloud, "Damn you, Iuz, for the pig-bastard you are! Someday I, Obmi the Wily, shall become ruler of your realm, and you will cringe before me in abject terror at the fate I will bestow upon you!" Then, not wasting further effort on his hatred, the dwarf began to lay his plans for accomplishing the orders of the cambion, Iuz.

Ten days later, the company turned on the train of pilgrims and merchants they had been accompanying, some as travelers, others purporting to be guards. Treachery and surprise enabled Obmi to succeed with surprising ease, and only three of his number were lost in the process. The company was near the crossroads that made the area important. A well-repaired road ran east and west, from Furyondy to Veluna City, while another ran southward from Littleberg to Verbobonc. The site was perfect, of course.

"Take everything of value, Gleed, and lead the men toward Dyvers. At the main fork, take the Willip Road. Your destination is Molag!"

The gnome stared at Obmi in surprise. "Molag? What business have we with the Hierarchs?" he asked.

"They will receive us happily, and pay for our services and information. Am I to be questioned further?" As he posed his question, Obmi placed his hand on his hammer. Gleed shook his head, but there was doubt in the gnome's squinting eyes as Obmi went on. "Keak and I will take the useless steeds and lay a false trail toward the north. You make sure that your trail is well covered by using only the road as long as possible. We'll lead any pursuit as far as Littleberg, lose ourselves there, and then come cross-country to join you ... let us say Boulder-ford on the Veng River, fifty leagues north of Willip." Gleed thought a moment, then nodded. The gnome had mentally pictured the route and arrived at the conclusion that the two routes were of about equal length and would conjoin at the ford, just as Obmi had suggested.

"An excellent plan, Master Obmi! The loot . . ."

Obmi shrugged his massive shoulders, feigning resignation. "For once I have to trust you fully, gnome. I must travel quickly and cleverly to lay the false trail, then be able to disappear. All the goods, even the silver and gold, must go with your group. I am charging you with safe keeping of the spoils until I rejoin the company - fail me, and I swear I will hunt you down and slay you!"

At that Gleed grinned, then quickly replaced the look with one of sober acquiescence. "Your orders, Obmi, are always faithfully followed by your servant, Gleed. Never fear, we shall be at the Boulderford as commanded. Give us two weeks." The dwarf scratched his beard, staring at Gleed as he did so, a mixture of doubt and consideration playing across his leathery countenance. Finally he nodded. " Let us say two and a half weeks - eighteen days - so that unexpected delays are covered. If you are not there within the allotted time, I shall seek you out," Obmi concluded with a threatening tone.

"Eighteen days, Master. I will be there!"

The gnome went off then to gather the company, while Obmi sought out the skinny Keak. This was almost too easy, thanks to the greed of the gnome, Obmi thought as he smiled merrily to himself.

Chapter 11

The high court of Celene was ablaze with light. Queen Yolande was celebrating the midsummer with a grand ball this night. High above carpets as green as the rich summer grass, domed ceilings showed the black velvet of the cloudless sky with its myriad stars and the full faces of both moons, pale Luna and azure Celene.

Fantastically carved and delicately wrought lanterns of all sorts, many with crystal and gems inset to refract and color their candies, competed with tapers reflected by mirrors of glass, copper, silver, and even gold positioned throughout the many-chambered palace. The Grand Court was awash in golden light, while other courts and salons adjoining it were either dim or bright, amethyst-hued, silvery, or illuminated so as to rival the cool depths of sea or ocean. All was harmonious and enchanting, each place exciting and different.

As carefully as the dozens of chambers were lit, so too their furnishings were chosen, complementing and enhancing the effect of each area so as to please the eye. Plants and flowers were everywhere, likewise blending with light and color, adding their special fragrances to the hall or court they graced. Here, night-blooming jasmine was a centerpiece in a salon of deep blue; there, green fronds and leafy branches screened yet another alcove whose dim interior sparkled with a rainbow of little colored dots as bejeweled lamps turned and swayed in the gentle zephyrs that flitted throughout the palace, causing even candle flames to dance and bow in seeming rhythm to the sweet strains of elvish music that accompanied these breezes.

The polished alabaster of the floor of the Grand Court bore no rug nor carpet. Hundreds of slippered feet moved across its surface, intricately stepping to solemn air or spritely melody. The dancers were begowned in silks and gossamers, garbed in velvets and satins, and glittering with cloth woven of precious metals. More glittering still were the arrays of gorgeous jewelry - diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, opals, and every other sort of gemstone imaginable.

Gray elves and faeries in indigo, gold, and white, purple, silver, and yellow, their high elven kin in soft hues of dove gray, blue, violet, green, and even a sprinkling of sylvan elves in chocolate brown and scarlet moved thus to the dance. With them were some few half-elves and humans, gnomes and half-lings. These folk added still other dress and colors to the

spectacle - orange, fuchsia, citrine, mauve, turquoise, pink, crimson, maroon, and even black. Obtrusive only by the contrast of their garb, archers in green and brown and royal guards in silvered chainmail whose splendor was belied by the wood and steel of partisan and greatsword stood rigidly along walls and in alcoved balconies. Even in such festive surroundings as these, precautions were taken.

Silver horns and gold pipes sounded, and the throng parted so as to open a wide circle in the middle of the chamber. Coronets and diadems of noble lords and ladies formed the inner circle, and the handsome princes and beautiful princesses bent their knees and bowed their heads of platinum and golden tresses, raven-haired high elves, auburn-locked sylvan elves too. The Queen and her consort, Fasstal Dothmar, were taking the floor to dance the ritual steps of the Midsummer Frolic, the last formal requirement of the celebration.

When it was completed, the audience would empty into the acres of wooded gardens and parks that surrounded the palace. There they would doff most of their excess finery to trip and prance in dances and games of ancient elvish sort. This heritage could not be ignored by even royal elves when Rich-fest came and the twin moons of Oerth proclaimed Midsummer's own night. Only when the sky paled and dawn came would the revelry cease.

Queen Yolande and the tall Dothmar trod the steps of the dance alone for a full minute; then, as protocol demanded, royalty joined them, and then nobility, so that after a few minutes the hall was a swirl of color and motion. Suddenly the great doors at the far end of the chamber swung open. The ranked guards in the antechamber beyond slammed spear butts loudly upon the marble squares of the floor, and a silver bell sounded a reverberating note that caused the musicians to falter in their playing.

Into the Grand Court strode an old elfin mage's robes, with him a travel-stained druid, and behind them a straggle of others likewise clad in motley, dirty garments. What impertinence! Not even the Royal Court Mage would dare to interrupt so important and marvelous an occasion as this - yet here came the old geezer, Onselvon, now! The frowning crowd parted before his scowl, and, his staff making loud clattering noises in the suddenly silent chamber, the court mage strode purposefully toward the royal couple.

"How now, Onselvon!" called Dothmar. "You disturb the Queen!"

"Not to mention our noble guests," noted Yolande softly. She then turned her lilac-colored eyes to Onselvon and his incongruous entourage. "There had better be a good reason indeed, cousin, for this outrageous intrusion on our revel!"

"Your Majesty," Onselvon said with a slight bow. "Your Royal Highness," he added, nodding his head toward the outraged Dothmar. "I come with grave and dire news, and I must crave Your Majesty's forgiveness and immediate attention."

"Crave? You demand, not beg!" sputtered Dothmar, but Yolande laid her slender, white hand upon her consort's arm, and he shut his mouth in a grim line.

"How dire, mage? Say softly now."

Onselvon shook his head slowly. "The gravest," he replied to the Queen in a voice that only the three of them could hear.

"Princes and Princesses, Lords and Ladies," said Yolande in her clear voice, "I must speak a few words with our mage and his honored guests. You have our permission to resume the frolic, and when we return, the revel shall proceed henceforth to the parks and greenery."

The musicians resumed their playing as queen, consort, and mage went without unseemly haste through a short hallway to a paneled and frescoed audience room suitable for the urgency of the need. At Onselvon's beckoning, the group of strange guests followed, and a squad of the queen's guards brought up the rear.

"Out with it, cousin," Yolande demanded of the royal mage as soon as they were in the room. "I do not desire to keep my court dancing for hours!"

Onselvon again bowed slightly. "As Your Majesty commands. These are warriors fighting for Light," the white-haired old elf said, indicating the eight adventurers with a sweep of his arm. "Dismiss the guards, for these are the bearers of intelligence which only you two must be privy to." The queen nodded, and the guards withdrew. The mage then related the whole business succinctly, finishing with the fact that an agent of the hated Iuz was thought to have the precious third of the artifact created to restore Evil to the world. "Hear for yourself. I present Druid Greenleaf; Lord Gellor; Lady Deirdre; a fellow mage, Oscar; agent Gord; and the doughty fighters Incosee, Moon, and Patrick." Each of the visitors bowed deeply as the queen and consort acknowledged the brief introduction.

"Tell us now of your mission," Dothmar instructed, "so Her Majesty may make full her understanding."

Gellor, with appropriate homage, stood forth a step and related the beginning of the affair. The ruler of Celene glanced at her consort and nodded, acknowledging that she was aware of the alliance to prevent Evil from accomplishing its goal. The half-elf then concluded the rapid narration, for Greenleaf had assumed the coordination of things once the party had been assembled.

"Your undertaking serves Celene as well as all other states of goodwill," said the queen, "so we will now lend what assistance is possible. It is time for our return to the revels," she said with a worried expression playing across her delicate and strikingly beautiful features. "But we will send our constable to you soon. Onselvon, you have our leave to take these stout and goodly folk to the guest chambers of the Royal Wing of the palace. See that they are given all they need to refresh and rest them. The constable will join you soon."

Yolande and Dothmar departed then, as Onselvon and the tired and worn adventurers once again made appropriate obeisance. The court magic-user then beckoned for the others to follow him, and without further word he turned his back on them and strode from the room, taking a small passage screened by an arras.

"Come on, Gord," Gellor urged the young thief. "You seem to be thunderstruck - what's wrong?" The one-eyed bard grabbed Gord's upper arm and began towing him along.

"She is more beautiful than any other woman I have ever seen . . ." Gord replied dazedly, "even Evaleigh, and they could be sisters."

"Yes, Lady Evaleigh did show a strain of faerie heritage, but that's magic gone from the wand, if you will. It's our purpose now which is important, so pay attention, understand?" When Gord nodded, Gellor saw his expression and added, "If you must look for substitutes for your lost lady love, don't look at queens, and do it when our quest is complete - Celene is open to you, and the fair damsels of the court will receive you well - provided we triumph."

About then, they came to a rather plain room whose curving wall indicated it was in a tower. The constable, Parseval, met them there and escorted the group to his private quarters. The noble elfs party dress contrasted sharply with the austerity of the furnishings and the martial

trappings that adorned the walls, but Parseval seemed unaware of the incongruity of his appearance in these surroundings. Despite his rather foppish garb, his manner was hard and direct. Queen Yolande had told him but little of the matter, so once again the druid and the bard explained - with many additions, this time, by Deirdre. This bothered Gord, for the constable seemed too fine-featured and handsome to him, and Deirdre's participation in the account all too obvious an attempt to flirt with the noble gray elf. How easily, he thought bitterly, women's heads were turned by pretty men.

"We have had some small intelligence of this entire scheme," said Parseval, unrolling a vellum map as he spoke. "A week ago, a distant cousin of mine came seeking information - which I did give to him. Melf, my adventurous kinself, has sworn fealty to the Lord Mordenkainen. He was here to discover the whereabouts of a band of reavers reportedly led by a renegade dwarf - a bandit company that I myself am hunting." The constable paused momentarily to peer intently at the unrolled map of Celene and its bordering territories. Then he went on.

"Here," he said pointing to the edge of the Suss Forest in the southernmost region of Celene. "This is where they first struck. A Royal Patrol spied them, but the villains killed nearly all of its number. These brigands then moved northward. They sacked and burned several small communities and waylaid a caravan too. They were shielded with a powerful dweomer, so our magic-users were unable to locate their whereabouts. Three forces were sent to intercept them, but these murderers somehow slipped between two of them and seemed bent on coming directly for here. Instead, they turned back and went northeast, getting clear and away into the Kron Hills before we knew. Melf is now trying to intercept them, I believe," Parseval concluded.

During his short recounting of these events, the constable had traced the path of the brigand gang on the map. Gellor studied the chart carefully and then asked, "Where do you suppose they are now?"

"Our agents in Hommlet have just informed us that a band of evil-looking men and demi-humans passed through that village three days ago. That is the last we have heard. The problem is now one for Veluna or Furyondy; Celene is no longer concerned." The constable said this last with a great deal of satisfaction in his voice.

"You err!" Gord interjected, allowing his scorn for the effete-seeming elf to show in his tone and expression. "If those outlaws bear what we fear,

their escape could mean the end of all goodness and reason - and the fall of your isolated little kingdom, too!"

Parseval flushed and was ready to retort, but Greenleaf spoke first. "The manner of my comrade is wrong, Lord Constable, but his words bear much weight. Not just kingdoms are at stake here; we fight for the world!"

"Say on, druid," Parseval said expressionlessly. "Your queen sent you to us because Celene is in jeopardy. You must aid us immediately, for if we do not intercept that band of brigands, the consequences might be dire."

The constable looked solemnly at the half-elven druid, then shrugged. "Use your power to follow after these outlaws then, just as you did to enter Enstad."

"Each use of spell runs the risk of alerting the enemy - or worse," Onselvon said sternly "It is not to niggle that you were sent here, Lord Constable, but to give assistance as our queen directs."

"Ah-ummm," said Parseval, becoming uneasy under the piercing eyes of the old mage. "I suppose that you are right, Onselvon. The greater the strength of those seeking to foil the machinations of the Lower Planes, the better our chances for a happy result." With that, Parseval indicated the position of Enstad on the old vellum map. "It is some forty leagues from here to Hommlet - three days of hard riding, for much of the way is through the moundy Krons. Mounted on winged steeds, though - steeds such as the Royal Hippogriffs - the journey is one of but hours. Such aerial travel is perilous, of course, but you all seem capable, and time is precious. Agreed?"

There was a murmur of general assent from the eight strangers and a brief nod of approval from Onseivon, so the constable nodded with finality and spoke again. "Do what you must do, then, between now and mid-morning. I will have instructions sent to the staviary, the place which houses the hippogriffs, and all will be ready at the appointed hour. Eight mounts and an escort of a dozen of Her Majesty's Guards will await. You will be taken as far as the northernmost edge of the Kron Hills." Then he added with a note of warning, "No farther will our steeds take you, no deeper will our guards go, for Celene will retain her isolation. Nor will we deal with the men of other kingdoms. It is enough that we take such as you to the very edge of human realms."

"A fair enough arrangement," said Curley Greenleaf, stroking his palm over his bald pate. The gesture emphasized the human side of the druid's

heritage, for elves never grew bald. "What of our quarry? Won't they still be beyond our reach?"

"Only two days at worst," Parseval asserted. "See where Hommlet lies?" he added, pointing to the central portion of the hilly region along the northern border of the elven kingdom. "These murderous rogues move erratically and with no great haste. This very night sees them no great distance from Hommlet, I am sure. If they are near Verbobonc, as I am sure they are, tomorrow they will ford the Velverdyva River, or head for the upper reaches of the Gnarley Forest. In either case, you will be here," and again Parseval pointed at the map, indicating the place they would be conveyed to. "Two days swift pursuit will enable you to catch your foes."

"How do we follow these malign reavers?" Gord demanded. "You are leaving us afoot!"

The court mage replied to this. "Never fear, Gord of Grey-hawk, I am doing my part in this too. Friends and good horses will be waiting nearby when you arrive. You will have all the help that Celene, and the elves of Welkwood too, can provide. Although our stout constable still seems somewhat uncertain as to the importance of your quest, I do comprehend its true nature and meaning."

"Enough then," Parseval interjected. "This night is most sacred to Celene and all elfkind, and I must return to the revel. A servant will show you to your quarters . . . although I suppose, as guests of Queen Yolande, you are entitled to join in our celebration if you choose."

The latter was said in a tone so dark as to discourage ready acceptance of the vague invitation. While the others turned and started to follow the liveried elf who had silently appeared at Parseval's mention of quarters, however^ Deirdre addressed the constable.

"Thank you, Lord Parseval, for the kind and generous offer of sharing," she said. "I, for one, have no desire to brood in some room for the next few hours and would indeed enjoy sharing elven joy at Midsummer's Night."

"Come then, fair lady cavalier," Parseval said with a gracious smile as he extended his arm. "There are fountains where you may refresh yourself, and bowers where gear such as yours can be changed for the dress of the revel - and you may call me Parseval ... if I may call you . . . ?"

"It is Deirdre, my lord - Parseval, rather," the young cavalier said. Then she waved toward her associates and smiled at them. "I shall see you at mid-forenoon, then, and good night!"

Gord was the last to head for the rooms where they would rest, and he stumped along with a black look as he went. Surely, he thought, as bad as elven fickleness was, that of humans was worse still.

Chapter 12

"You must leave now," said the cleric to the elf. "Time works against you."

Melf shook his head. "I have but three others with me," he countered. "If there is to be a chance of overcoming more than a score of the most savage brigands in a decade, the party must be augmented - a good cleric, at least!"

"I can offer no assistance there," came the reply, "for this temple houses only myself and a handful of underpriests. None are suitable for such an undertaking, Melf. May I suggest to you that you underestimate your own prowess?"

"Venerable Halomew, you subtly seek to influence me by flattery. I seek only to complete my mission."

The balding high priest of Celestian smiled benignly, took the elf by his mail-clad arm, and steered him toward the rear exit of the chamber. "Let us walk to the stables as we converse," he said. "Although you serve Mordenkainen, Veluna's interests are at stake here also, I assure you. All that I can do has been done, and it is now up to you and your associates, but you are not alone. Honor and glory to the first who stop these rogues and gain the prize."

"Are you certain that this intelligence is correct?" Melf asked, tapping the small roll of parchment the high priest had given him earlier.

"The facts are as given, and divination has revealed that if you speed due east the foe will be met," the high priest reassured him.

The elven warrior-mage shrugged. "Then we four bear a heavy burden - but bear it we must. We will leave immediately, for all is in readiness."

"The stars guide you and the heavens watch over you," Venerable Halomew said in benediction. Then, smiling and clasping the gray elfs hand, he said, "Melf… good luck! Before you go, there is a question I must ask.”

Melf was puzzled, but he liked the old cleric, and nodded m him. "You may ask."

"Why do you use this name Melf? Prince Brightflame…"

"Cease!" Melf commanded without regard for Halomew's station. "It is recorded that I gave up all titles and claims, so name not these bygone things to me. As for Melf, it is a simple name, as good as any." Then he unbent a little and admitted, "This art of dweomercrafting is a perilous one,

good cleric, and one must protect one's true name as carefully as a miser hoards his treasured gold."

"My blessings upon you and the others, then . . . Melf," said the priest, and he took his leave of the elven fighter-mage as they reached the stables.

Four armored riders cantered eastward on swift destriers. In the lead was the gray elf fighter and spell-caster, Melf. Next to him rode his friend and henchman, Biff. This halfling certainly had another name also, but as a swordsman and thief, one of his sort wished to avoid notoriety, to say the least. Behind these small figures came a pair of large men. The larger by far was Chert, a barbarian axeman wearing chainmail shirt and a plain helmet. Leather leggings and heavy boots protected his legs, but he disdained a shield. Beside him rode a hard-eyed crossbowman who called himself Lizard. This worthy was clad in scale mail, which did lend a semblance of reptilian nature to him. Tall and lean-muscled, Lizard prided himself in his accuracy with his chosen weapon, the arbalest.

"There is a fire under the elfs saddle," Lizard commented as he and Chert moved their steeds from canter to gallop following Melfs lead.

"Aye," agreed Chert, laughing. "When I signed on for this expedition, I thought to escape the dull routine of soldiering in Veluna. Now we might as well be warding some caravan!"

"Better the merchant train than this," the leathery-skinned crossbowman called back. "Caravans move at a more dignified pace, offer comfortable ease at night, and often have comely lasses amidst their baggage!" Further conversation was withheld, for they needed their attention and wind for the journey.

"There is the Velverdyva!" Melf shouted as he reined in his sweating steed. They had ridden hard for two days to arrive at this place on the great river that formed the boundary between Veluna and the Kingdom of Furyondy. There was a collection of buildings near the pier that marked the ferry here. "We will spend the night at Shanscross and take the first ferry tomorrow," said the leader.

All were pleased to find a small but well-kept inn in the thorp. Lizard, Biff, and Chert retired immediately after supping, but Melf stayed late in the common room, sipping wine and listening to the crackle of the fire and the idle chatter of barman and a pair of local patrons.

"Bring me a cold meat pie, Okelard cheese of the smoked sort, fruit, and your best wine!" a whining voice demanded.

This woke Melf from his doze, and he turned to see what the commotion was about. He noted that the order had come from a tall, skinny elf. As he looked, the lanky fellow returned his gaze with a smiling face but cold, cold eyes. The barman hurried to comply, going into the kitchen to fetch the viands, while a young wench, probably his daughter, drew a beaker of wine from a large cask behind the counter. The girl was well-formed, and the mop of auburn ringlets that framed her delicate face was most fetching.

"Draw two goblets extra, my pretty!" the thin elf called to her as she finished filling the container he had ordered. "One for me, one for you," he said with a rising cackle. "Then you can help me Carry the lot upstairs," he concluded with a suggestive giggle.

The wench flushed and shook her curls. "My father does not permit me to drink with patrons," she said with a tone of disgust that could be taken as discontent with either the for-biddance or the offer. The expression on her pretty face, however, left little doubt as to the cause of her revulsion.

"Eh? We'll see about that, my saucy little trollop. Barman! Come here at once!" Although the fellow was still laughing as he called, there was cruelty and threat in the cackling.

Melf arose from his chair and strode to a place near the unsavory elf. "Allow me to buy those two flagons you mentioned, sir elf, and to introduce myself to a fellow demi-human. I am Melf of the Arrow. And you, sir?"

The skinny elf stared unblinkingly at Melf, assessing him carefully. It was evident that he cared for neither the intrusion nor the offer of wine. But Melfs steel-clad form and the easy bearing he maintained under the scrutiny disconcerted the other elf, and he cackled to break the tension he felt within. "Yes, of course," he said. "I am Keak, and I will accept offer of a drink."

"Keak, then. A native of these parts?"

"Nay, a stranger like yourself - merely passing through," the odd elf giggled in reply.

"Crossing the Velverdyva?"

"No, my comrade and I are taking . . . goods . . . from his home in the Kron Hills to my own. Do you know Highfolk?" Keak's laughter rang with a happy yet mocking note as he asked Melf the question. "It is a lovely, lovely place, you know."

Melf could not help concluding that this elf was imbalanced. From a half-wit, such constant giggling and laughing could be expected, but Keak was certainly in possession of all normal faculties - except that they were awry.

"I have been there once or twice, both town and valley," Melf responded. "Is your companion elvish too?"

"Ahahahh, ha, ha, heehee! That squatty little fellow elvish? Never! Some call us an odd pair, traveling alone together as we always do - my friend is most interested in rocks and soils, while I collect butterflies and other insects - but it works out well enough," said Keak with a rollicking giggle and a wild eye.

Any further conversation was cut off by the arrival of the innkeeper's daughter with a great tray of food. Without comment she placed it firmly down upon the counter and looked expectantly at the skinny elf. Keak tittered, shrugged, plunked down a few coins, and turned again to Melf.

"My companion will be rooting about in his haversack for interesting rocks, so if you'd care to join us in a midnight repast, Melf of the Arrow, you are welcome. Heh, heh, ha, tee hee! Elvish talk would please me much."

Feigning regret he certainly did not feel, Melf declined. "The invitation is most kind, but the hour is late. On the morrow I must hasten east. Good night and safe journey to you, Keak."

"Farewell then yourself, and may your passage carry you speedily to the lands beyond the broad Velverdyva!"

As Melf turned to pay his reckoning, the curly-headed girl smiled warmly at him. "My thanks, sir, for intervening. That one isn't right, you know, and I was afraid. Were it not for a bold and decent person such as yourself, I fear he might have made a lot of trouble, and who's there here to resist such a one?"

"No matter now," Melf replied casually, "for he has gone abed, and you may likewise retire behind a locked door, safe and sound."

"Oh, that's just it, sir! I sleep alone in the loft just at the end of the hall above, and I believe that maniac will creep into my bed when it is quiet. Locks wouldn't prevent his type from entering, you know," the girl concluded in conspiratorial tones. As she leaned close to whisper thus, a good part of her bosom was displayed to Melf’s view.

"Delightful . . ." he mumbled.

"What was that, sir?"

"Frightful, I said. Frightful indeed!" Melf said quickly. "But perhaps I could . . ."

"Thank you, sir ... may I call you Sir Melf? I overheard you tell the other your name," she added apologetically. "And my name is Silyoni."

"Silyoni? Yes, a pretty name for a beautiful girl. It is Melf, Silyoni, without the honorific. Just Melf. . . ."

With Keak and his lunatic presence forgotten, Melf sipped wine and chatted with the young country girl until the last patrons left and the place closed for the night. He and Silyoni walked hand in hand up the stairs, then, and he guarded her until dawn. There were no undesired intrusions, and no one came unannounced. When morning came, the girl pronounced him both a hero and an upright protector.

Unfortunately, he fell asleep just about then, and it was near forenoon when Melf finally arrived downstairs to greet his companions where they sat waiting, their morning meal long finished. As he came down, Silyoni gave him a smile and a wink, then bustled away to serve a trio of traders demanding an early dinner.

"You look worn," said Lizard with a concerned voice.

"The girl yonder looks chipper enough," Biff the halfling said, staring innocently at the ceiling. "She must be a witch who used energy transference to sap our leader's strength in fashion vampiric!"

All three burst out in gales of laughter as Melf turned crimson at the jest. Although he was old by human standards, to be celebrating his 165th birthday soon, this was still young by elven standards. Simply put, Melf was shy and not a little awkward and prudish about certain things.

"Enough of that!" said Melf, breaking the mood. "Biff, see to the payment for our stay. Chert, you and Lizard get our coursers ready - and make certain that they have clean hooves and that there is grain in the saddlebags."

Still grinning, they three went to carry out their leader's orders. Melf broke his fast with some gruel of groat clusters, crisp herbs, and oatcakes and bumblebee honey, washed down with a mug of blackberry tea. He gulped his food, hardly tasting it, blaming himself for making them late. How could he tarry so when the fate of mankind and elves might hang on his actions! Silyoni tried to be pleasant, but Melf was too worried to notice.

"Ah, Sir Melf, will you be returning again soon?"

"Fate knows, not I!" he snapped. "What of Keak?"

"That wretched stick? Why do I care if he ever returns?" the girl replied crossly.

"When did he and his dwarven companion leave?" demanded Melf.

Silyoni slammed his mug of tea down. "They left an hour after dawn, the evil bandy grinning, and Keak with his awful giggling - he even pinched me on the bottom as he left, not that you'd care!" With that the girl flounced off. Melf didn't notice, for he was thinking hard about the strange elf. Something he couldn't quite identify was gnawing at the back of his consciousness. "Damn!" he said aloud, but there was nobody close enough to notice. Silyoni was nowhere to be seen, so he slipped a gleaming lucky under his tea mug, knowing that the lass would find it there when she cleared the table. Tightening his sword belt, he walked outside to where his fellows waited with the horses.

Despite the late start, they continued to make good time. The weather was fair, and Furyondy kept its roads in excellent repair. They camped under a starry sky that night, and the next as well. Arriving at the town of Littleberg late the next night, they took shelter in a tavern. The fine weather had turned rainy, and the horses were worn. Much to the surprise of all, a priest of Celestian found them there the next morning and gave them further news. Their quarry was reported to be traveling northward not more than a day's distance from the broad ford of the Alt River. As this was only a few hours' ride upstream, Melf decided that they should risk rain and high water in order to pursue hotly the vile crew they sought. This was exactly what the high priest desired, and to assist their journey, he had extra steeds and fresh supplies ready. They left Littleberg behind, obscured in sheets of blowing drizzle, and made the broad ford by high noon.

By riding hard, switching mounts, and sleeping seldom, the four managed to eat up the leagues with great rapidity. Before long they had come to where the rutted track leading north toward the dark realm of the Hierarchs split away from the highroad northeast to Willip Town on the shores of the Nyr Dyv. This portion of the kingdom was far wilder and more lawless than that region where trade between Furyondy and the west flourished. Far above lay the sole crossing place of the Veng River - the Panggate, as it was called. Unscrupulous merchants and evil traders used this place to bring their wares to the lands of the Horned Ones, the domain of Molag. The four must travel this way too, looking for the marauders.

Rain continued for the next two days. Unlike the showers they had experienced when departing Littleberg, this precipitation came in torrential bursts, making all miserable and the track a quagmire. Nevertheless they

pressed onward, soaking, muddy, and exhausted. Finally the clouds broke into ragged tatters and a pale sun shone through.

"This is better," Biff observed, basking in the warmth of the sunlight, "but how much longer do we go on? Aside from wild creatures, we have seen nothing living since we took this accursed path!"

Melf smiled at the lazy little thief, for he knew full well how Biff preferred to spend his time. "Excellent, isn't it? No sightings means that we are undoubtedly ahead of those we seek. The foul conditions we have experienced will certainly have affected their train worse than it did us. When we come to a likely spot, we will establish an ambuscade and fall upon them when they come up!"

"Four ambush more than a score?" Chert said with incredulity.

Lizard laughed. "But think of how puissant a quartet we are!"

Biff looked nervous, and both mercenaries laughed at his expression. They had seen him practice his craft, including sword play and dagger throwing. Chert and Lizard knew that the halfling, despite his size and appearance, was a foe to be reckoned with.

"Less chatter, there," Melf said sourly. "We must be positive and decisive."

"I am positively ready for close combat," Chert exclaimed with a bellow that rang with assurance. "Cold steel is preferable to saddle sores and horse dung!"

Melf turned haughtily and rode away, leaving his companions to follow. "He doesn't always take such japes well," Biff told the others in a confidential tone. "But he is the most loyal and capable master a poor halfling such as I could ask." The sincerity of the statement was sufficient to stiffen both men, and they whistled and joked as they rode for the next few days, despite the hardships of the inhospitable countryside.

Chapter 13

"There is the Veng at last!" exclaimed Biff.

"And the Boulderford, which leads to Molag," added Lizard.

"We are ahead of those we seek, for nobody has come this way for days," Chert said as he studied the track.

"What twinkles so there, across the river?" asked Melf as he peered at the bluffs on the far side of the waterway that marked the beginning of the Horned Society, the lands of the dreaded Hierarchs and their unwholesome subjects. "Quick! Our horses to the hollow there," he commanded, pointing to a small dell to the left. "Stay with them while I scout ahead."

The others made no comment or objection, for they knew that the elven swordsman was also a spell-worker of considerable power. Melf had demonstrated his ability to become invisible and travel through the air like an arrow, and this is what he would certainly do now. The glittering on the far bank of the Veng was a body of troops, and an unseen, flying scout was a safe and sure way to determine who these soldiers were. Melf disappeared from view, moving toward the river. Chert, Biff, and Lizard waited patiently, soothing the eight horses to make sure the animals made no betraying sounds.

In only a few minutes Melf was back. "Be lively now!" he cried to his comrades. "Get the horses into that stand of scrub as quickly as you can, and hide yourselves too!"

"Does the enemy approach?" queried Lizard as he pulled a trio of mounts toward the thicket of box elders and tall shrubs.

"Nay, but they have an advance of great ravens which will most certainly overfly this very place soon, and I want no trace of us seen by such creatures," replied Melf as he urged his horses into the concealing foliage.

Biff appeared beside them suddenly, making the horses jerk back in fright. "Who sends such spies as carrion crows, Lord Melf?"

"Blast you and your creeping around in the bushes!" the elf replied hotly as he fought to quiet his courser. "Cease such foolery henceforth!"

"No creeping is needed," Biff said indignantly. "As halfling and thief, I move as naturally in such stuff as this as that giant yokel strides over hills and dingles." He grinned at Chert as he spoke this last, causing the barbarian to glower back with a look that promised terrible retribution if he ever grasped the small demi-human in his huge hands.

"The small one's query is apt," Lizard interjected laconically. "At whose behest come the ravens?"

Melf agreed, and as the four hid themselves amid the greenery, he related what he had seen.

"After becoming invisible," he began, "I winged upward to gain a bird's-eye view of the terrain on the northern verge of the valley. Flying across the Veng, then, I noted a large force of soldiers. Their advance is a body of the most benighted humans I have seen in many years - mercenary brigands, unless I miss my mark. Behind comes a battalion of hobgoblins led by a grim-garbed and horn-helmed rider attended by several underclerics. The chief is certainly one of the Hierarchs.

"This great troop was in the process of encamping, and as their scouts returned to the camp, a large flock of ravens, huge ones too, was loosed. I knew full well that my presence would be detected by the leader if I came closer, and when the birds were sent forth it was time for me to take my leave, for those malign croakers of evil might well sense my whereabouts also."

"Are we safe here?" asked Biff uneasily. "Probably, for the light evens toward dusk as we speak," the elf replied. "Still, as soon as possible we will return along our route a mile or two. Such distance will give us the security we need. It seems that the force is placed so as to await the arrival of someone, but perhaps they intend to cross the river and invade. We will keep sharp lookout tonight."

Chert was dissatisfied. "What of the caravan of bandits we lie in wait for? This regiment of troops surely spoils our plans."

"As long as they remain on the far side of the Veng, I intend to go ahead with the ambush," Melf said with determination. "We will hit these reavers, slay them, and gain our prize before the Hierarch and his foul servitors can react."

"What then?" Lizard asked slowly.

"We ride as if pursued by night fiends!" was the elfs answer.

Chuckling at this candor, all four settled down to await full darkness. When the sky showed an array of twinkling stars, they led their steeds back toward the south, avoiding the trail. After camping in a sheltered ravine, they determined sentry duty and settled down for an uneasy sleep. In the morning Biff related an encounter with a giant owl who spoke to him of the force on the opposite shore. The owl had come because of the ravens, and it

was moving as far from the area as it could because of these ebon-feathered marauders. The owl stated that it thought the encampment looked permanent, because the hobgoblins had been cleaning out the limestone caves along the bluff during hours of darkness.

"That confirms my thinking," Melf told the others. "So we set our trap as planned."

The track leading to Boulderford ran across the relatively open prairie, wound through the low hills, and then dropped into the Veng River valley where the forces of nature had created a natural ramp along the steep bluffs that marked the basin of the watercourse. Some three miles from these bluffs, at a place where the worn trail bent sharply right, they placed themselves in wait. On the left of the road, near the turn, Melf readied his magic as the huge barbarian honed his enchanted battle-axe, Brool. The barbarian hummed softly to the weapon, feeling most comfortable in the rocky little hummocks where they concealed themselves. Across the way Biff and Lizard waited. The halfling had his sling ready, and beside him rested a dozen leaden bullets, each missile engraved with strange runes and carrying a special dweomer of deadly sort. He and Lizard had arranged a contest between themselves, for the crossbowman likewise had stubby quarrels painted with mystic sigils and enchanted to fell purposes. The one who slew fewer of the enemy with his missiles must give over to the other a tithe of his battlefield loot.

"What if the dust that cloud-bumping clod detected marks some procession other than that we seek?" Biff asked.

"Unless our leader says otherwise, we strike," Lizard said as he rearranged his bolts once again. "No weal comes from any who would have intercourse with the Hierarchs in any case, so we will discommode no one of good by such action. Do you think Melf will allow these folk to pass unmolested if they appear to be ordinary riffraff come to trade with the Horned scum?"

"Most probably," the halfling mused. "He is bent only on laying low the raiders who pillaged Celene and then crossed the Kron Hills on their trek northward. We pursued them long ere we encountered you and Chert, you know, and that band is my master's only target. He will withhold his spells if the caravan is not the enemy he seeks."

Lizard shook his head sadly. "Too bad. Whoever comes is sure to be laden with valuables."

Laughing softly at the mercenary's regretful response, Biff too began realigning and readying his bullets and weapons. An hour later the first outriders of the approaching caravan came into view. There were about a dozen men, lightly armored, riding swift steeds. They approached in an open formation, fanned out so as to observe all the ground ahead and to both sides of the track. The horses had been hidden well, however, and the advance guards failed to detect the presence of the four hidden adventurers lying in wait amid the rocks and shrubs a hundred paces from the route. At the sharp bend, one of the advance guards rode back to the main body while the others continued slowly toward the river.

The main body came about a half-mile behind the advance. It consisted of several carts with huge wheels. These vehicles, as well as the score of mules that followed them, were laden with goods. About a dozen teamsters and animal handlers were with diem. A like number of armed raiders flanked the caravan. Before this procession was a huge, houda-equipped horse and three warhorses ridden by steel-encased warriors. Behind came a straggle of footmen herding a line of bearers. The latter appeared to be females, evidently taken for sale into slavery in the lands of the Horned Society of the Hierarchs. This could only be the band that Melf sought.

"There!" Biff called softly to his companion. "See the jaundiced vapors which have sprung up and roll toward the track? Master Melf casts his dweomer even now!"

Lizard peered at the growing mass of foglike vapor that was spreading outward and downward toward the approaching train. "They see the stuff," he replied excitedly to the halfling.

The outriders on the caravan's left were shouting. The train lurched ahead more rapidly in a confusion of cries and cracking whips. Too late. The cloud surged upon the track like an avalanche, engulfing animals and men in its roiling vapors. When it touched them, horses and mules kicked, bucked, and then fell. Men took a few steps and then likewise died. The cloud of poisonous vapors covered the trail from hillside to hillside and remained. The path was closed, but the head and tail of the caravan were untouched.

Lizard aimed carefully and released the first of his quarrels. An instant later, one of the guards at the head of the column of prisoners dropped in his tracks. "One!" shouted the cross-bowman triumphantly as he placed another quarrel in his arbalest and cocked it in one smooth motion.

The halfling's sling made a brief whirring sound, and another of the guards fell. "And one," Biff retorted.

As they began this assault with their missiles, the scene was changing quickly. At the rear of the caravan, those brigands not overcome by the poisonous cloud were quick to understand their peril and react. Several of the outriders joined these men, and the group turned the prisoners and retreated down the trail at a trot. Biff and Lizard had managed to fell two each and wound another two before the remainder were out of range. What was transpiring in the center of the column, however, was what drew their attention. Two armed figures appeared out of the cloud of poisonous vapors. These men were coming directly toward their position, for they had seen the pair at their contest.

Biff spun his sling and released the leaden bullet. "Tough foemen to survive those killing fumes!" he grunted to Lizard as the missile he had slung flew in the direction of one of the armored brigands coming toward their position.

"Quick too," Lizard said softly as the man used shield and movement to deflect the sling bullet. "Not over-quick, though!" he exclaimed as his quarrel buzzed and cut a bloody path across the exposed leg of the same brigand.

Neither said anything further. The two attackers were almost upon them, so they saved their breath. One more missile from Biffs sling, another bolt from Lizard's arbalest, and then halfling and human were grabbing dagger and sword to engage in close combat with the screaming brigands.

Events at the head of the caravan were going awry also. The leader's canopied mount, and the trio of guards as well, were clear of the rolling fog before it settled upon the path. When the cloud was seen, and its effects halted the train of brigands, the four at the van spurred their horses ahead, aiming at escape.

"The wind be damned!" Melf had cursed as the situation became clear. The breeze, gentle as it was, had caused his en-spelled cloud to strike behind the point he had intended. "Quick, Chert, to the enemy!" Without further word, wizard had gestured furiously, and a streak of burning fire raced from his finger. The flame inscribed a line that touched the fleeing brigands and then blossomed into a ball of roaring fire with a loud whoosh and a bang.

In an instant the burning globe consumed itself and was gone. Chert, loping down the hillside toward the road, hesitated for a split second when he observed the place where charred horses and dead men should have been. Instead there was a blackened circle and four galloping riders half a bowshot distant from the place.

"What happened, Melf?" Chert cried over his shoulder. Although there was no hope of him catching the fugitives now, the barbarian resumed his running anyway, calling out, "If you can stop them, I can slay the lot!"

Melf made no reply, for he was too busy. In a moment he was speeding through the sky, angling his course so that it intersected the line of the rough roadway as it twisted toward the ramplike descent from bluff top to river valley. As he went, the elven fighter-mage saw that the outriders were coming back to join the leader, having been attracted by the explosion of the fireball. On the opposite side of the Veng there was a black smudge in the air - the great ravens were beating upward and gathering in a flock. This was bad news! Having gained considerable ground on the escaping brigands, Melf shot downward, skidded to a halt on a grassy knoll, and began instantly to work another spell.

"You use illusions, do you?" Melf murmured under his breath as the results of his dweomercrafting were completed. "Then let's see how well you avoid the 'Tentacles!' "

Sooty black growths seemed to spring suddenly from the path in front of the four horsed brigands. The tentacles were so dark as to appear as nothingness, for they absorbed all light. The thick, ropelike strands writhed and twisted, lashing around in a hideous manner. Then, as if they were guided by some unseen eye, each of the ebon-hued protrusions grasped and entwined itself around a horse. One of the armored riders lost his seat when his mount was so seized, as the destrier lost its footing and crashed to the ground. This unfortunate brigand was immediately enwrapped in the coils of two of the black tentacles, members that were not already crushing mounts.

The other three riders were more fortunate - but not so their horses. Over a dozen of the rubbery arms had shot magically upward from Melf s enchantment, and at least a pair of the tentacles now held each animal. The two armored guards who were still in their saddles quit hacking at the snaky growths, leaped from their seats, and cut away at the tentacles holding the houda-bearing destrier.

All this occurred in but a trickle of time, a few minutes. Melf scarcely noted the activity, for he had other matters to deal with while the tentacles were seizing his quarry. The vanguard was nearly in a position to assist their leader, and it was time to deal with this threat. A sheet of flame shot up between outriders and the houda-bearing horse of the brigand leader, and several of the newcomers were consumed in the leaping tongues of fire, unable to save themselves by swerving or reining up short of the magical conflagration.

"Now for the rest!" Melf shouted aloud, running so as to place himself in position to cast his next spell. The horsemen milled in a knot before the wall of fire, and suddenly one of their number spotted the running elf. "That's grand," Melf grunted as he came to a sudden halt and began conjuring rapidly with odd, flashing gestures. His voice rose into a keening, whistling chant. Arrows thunked into the ground around him, and one glanced off his metal-shod leg, but he ignored them all.

"By a stroke of luck, I've ended your resistance," Melf said sardonically as he watched what occurred next. The horsemen had been galloping toward him in a straggle, and his answer had been a terrible bolt of lightning. The electricity was of violet blue, and it struck and leaped, arced and cracked from man to beast in a sizzling chain of death. When its full course had been run, nothing remained alive. The air was full of the smell of ozone and charred flesh. Despite himself, Melf felt sick. "Why must such be?" he asked the playful breezes softly. Then he returned to his duty.

Chert was upon the scene, avoiding the tentacles that still writhed, seeking someone or something to grasp. "Penwolf!" the barbarian screamed, the battlecry bringing the two mailed fighters around and on guard against him. The great battle-axe, Brool, buzzed a deathsong as the massive arms of the giant hillman brought the blade around in a glittering arc of steel. The war axe cleaved mesh and steel plate. Gurgling, one of the foemen pitched forward, a mortal wound gaping where the axe had nearly cut him in twain at the waist. His comrade, however, was upon Chert with a howl, delivering a stroke with his broadsword that left a red furrow across the barbarian's right arm. The two opponents settled down to a duel, axe versus broadsword, to the death.

"Shaz sneers at me!" Melf exclaimed, watching a wounded horse begin to trot slowly down the track. Before engaging Chert, the two henchmen of the mysterious rider had managed to chop the constricting tentacles. The

magical members had inflicted bloody damage upon the hapless war-horse, but the animal still stood and carried its houda and rider away as commanded. The horse was slow and Melf reacted quickly. He again gestured, uttered a strange, staccato string of syllables, and shot forth his arm, with forefinger extended. A series of thick, greenish bolts shot forth, each glowing missile following its predecessor unerringly to impact upon the canopied arrangement atop the huge destrier.

"This is not so, and I do not believe," Melf said loudly as he observed the effect of the spell. When the last of the greenish streaks struck the houdalike affair, the draperies burst into a sudden fire, a flash followed, and then horse and houda were no more. Only a greasy, brownish cloud of smoke wafted slowly down the path where mount and rider had been. "Bring me true vision," the elven mage uttered as he passed the symbol of Fharlanghn before his eyes. Revealed thus was the same destrier and its odd trappings, proceeding as if nothing had occurred, save for the scorched areas of the canopy where his magic missiles had struck home.

"Now it is time for the final act of this charade," Melf said as he took flight, arrowing directly toward the concealed figure atop the horse. Before him extended a spear that grew magically as he flew, changing from a weapon the height of a tall man to an ashen shaft as long as a horseman's lance. "Behind you, you bastard!" Melf shrieked just before he was upon his target. He saw the wizened visage of a gnome, one eye nearly popping, the other squinted nearly closed. The demi-human was frantically gesturing in order to evoke some dweomer, but only a vague fountain of muddled colors sprang forth before Melf s broad-bladed spear took the creature in the shoulder.

The impact nearly sent Melf spinning, but he managed to continue. The gnome was carried from the houda trailing a ragged tail of draperies. "Quarter!" he screamed, dangling like a speared fish.

Melf ceased his magical flight, using the impaling spear to pin the foe to the ground as his feet jolted upon the turf. One look told him that the illusion-using gnome was in extremis and would die soon indeed. "Your death can be quick and clean, or I can keep you suffering for some time yet - that is the only quarter you will receive from me. Now, your choice?"

The gnome peered desperately around, then he glared hatefully at his slayer. "My curse forever upon your foul, peaked-eared head, elf, for what you have done to me!" he screamed defiantly.

Melf leaned upon the magic spear and twisted the shaft. The malign visage before him crumpled in pain, and the gnome's knotty arms and legs thrashed wildly.

"Mercy! Mercy!" screamed the small creature. "The curse is withdrawn!"

"Demons and devils take your miserable little curse, you stinking creature of woe," spat Melf. "I care not a jot about such mouthings. What is your name? Where is the dwarf who is your leader? Tell me that, and then you have my mercy!"

"Gleed ... I am called Gleed, and my leader is ... not here."

Melf twisted the weapon again and raised his voice to be heard over the gnome's cries of pain. "What is the name of this fellow, and what have you - or he - done with the object you have stolen from the far Suss Forest?"

"Aahghhh! Stop! I serve Obmi, Obmi the dwarf. He is to be here, awaiting us now - "

"And the ancient item I know you have?" Melf demanded, still leaning heavily on his weapon.

"It . . . it is with Obmi. He and Keak were to distract pursuit while the rest of us crossed Furyondy and made for the haven of the Hierarch's lands - damn and curse you!"

Pale-faced, Melf slowly eased his pressure and stared unbelievingly at the gnome. Could this Gleed be telling the truth? "You say Obmi, a dwarf, has the item, and that this one is abetted by someone named Keak? Tell me now, and do not try my patience further: Is this Keak a tall and thin elf who is given to hysterical laughter?"

"Yes, yes! No more, elf! Give what you have promised!"

Melf spoke a word softly under his breath, and the ashen spear changed suddenly into a javelin of but three cubits in length, its head a long triangle of steel rather than a leaf-tipped point. With a shuddering sigh, the gnome was released of pain, for the small weapon was no longer impaling him. Before anything else could transpire, however, the sunlight on the meadow suddenly dimmed as if a cloud had passed overhead. "Aid me!" the wounded gnome called as loudly as he could. Raucous cawing and piercing croakings answered his plea. A battering wing struck Melf s shoulder, and a sharp beak as large as a small knife drove at his eyes.

There ensued a whirlwind battle, a melee of elf versus a storm of swooping, croaking ravens the size of eagles. Using javelin and sword, Melf managed to slay a dozen of the vile birds in half as many minutes, but

he was bleeding from as many wounds as well. Worse, there seemed to be more of the creatures winging down to join the fray, so that each time one squawked and fell dead, two were there to take the place of their dead flockmate. Then there were cries of anger and rage from the mass of foul ravens, and they flapped upward for a moment, giving Melf a respite. Wiping blood from his face, he glanced around to find the cause of the ravens' retreat.

"They like not Brool," a grinning Chert said, slowly swinging the long axe with mighty arms as gore-stained as the weapon's broad blade. Wounded ravens flopped on the ground at his feet. Several decapitated bodies were spread around him in a welter of inky feathers and crimson splatters.

"Well done!" cried Melf. "Perhaps now lean work up a bit of magic to finish them all."

"Here they come again," said the barbarian, bringing Brool up and enscribing a steely loop overhead to greet the swooping attack of the huge ravens.

A pair of the birds plummeted downward like stones. One had a thick quarrel protruding from its open beak, the other no head at all, for a leaden missile had carried the whole away when it found its mark. Unaware of the slaughter so done, the flock again attacked, giving no time for casting of spells. It was a brief sortie, though. Every bird that flapped up was brought low by bolt or sling bullet. Those within reach fell to axe, sword, and needle-pointed javelin.

"The carrion-eaters flee!" Melf said triumphantly as he sent a burning swarm of magical shafts after the birds. The glowing streaks hit a handful of the ravens and sent them tumbling and falling, dead, to leave sooty bundles of filth on the fair green of the sward.

"What's left of them," Chert agreed laconically, for even as Melf laid several low, another pair fell from quarrel and sling bullet. Only a dozen or so of the ravens lived to voice their mournful caws of hatred from a distance growing ever greater as they winged northward, back from where they had come.

"Well done I say again," said the elven spell-caster, this time not only to Chert, but to his halfling friend and the lean crossbowman who accompanied him.

"No great matter," Lizard said as he and Biff strolled toward the panting pair of combatants. "Strolled" was perhaps not the correct description, for the arbalester limped and Biff walked slowly, favoring his wounded left side.

"Aye, that's so," the halfling concurred as he halted near Melf and Chert. "This mountain and you, Master, would have knocked all those stinking wormbags from the air without us - our shooting merely hastened the process."

Chert patted the halfling gently atop his thick-haired head. "Thanks, nonetheless, minimus. The mountain appreciates the assistance of the mole."

"The contest elsewhere was hot," offered Lizard, "but the cowards at the rear eventually broke and ran, taking their prisoners with them as shields. We saw the circling ravens, so we gave up pursuit and came here instead."

"How many escaped?" Melf asked.

"No more than seven or eight all told. Lizard and I had a small contest, but neither he nor I won," Biff said with a crooked smile.

"Wrong! Halfling, who slew more blackbirds?" Lizard stared unwinkingly at the still grinning Biff as he spoke.

"You did keep count even then, did you?"

"Indeed, as you have."

"Just so," Biff laughed. "And you gain my tithe. . . ."

Chert interrupted the banter. "There!" die barbarian hill-man cried, pointing as he shouted. "What is that?"

Melf spat as he saw the cause for Chert's surprise. A bowshot's distance away, a gray-black horse had appeared suddenly from a clump of scrub. The odd-looking animal was running with impossible speed toward the river. "No matter," the elf said heavily. "It is but the vile little gnome using a phantom steed to escape us. A pity, for he is evil and undeserving of life, but that is of small consequence to us."

"The treasure? What of the artifact he bore?" Biff asked. "I was duped, and led us on the trail of those whom that crafty dwarf wished us to follow. Although I never saw this Obmi, I allowed him to slip through my fingers - and the artifact with him."

"How so?" asked the brawny hillman as he cleaned his great axe.

"At the inn, days ago. Obmi is accompanied by a lieutenant. This miserable, mad elf is called Keak. I met and had converse with him there.

The crafty jackal set me on this path while he and his evil master made for safety elsewhere," Melf said with a shake of his head.

Lizard laughed mirthlessly. "Laying low this pack of dogs is righteous work regardless. And now it is time to move on, I think!"

His three companions followed the direction of his steady gaze. They saw a thick, black fog forming on the other shore of the river. Above the gloom flew a score of the nighted ravens.

"This bodes ill indeed," Melf said. "Do what you wish here, but be ready to ride southward soon. I go to see what foulness is being invoked across the Veng; my guess is that it won't stay mere long!"

Melf was back before half an hour had passed. "The black fog is the very essence of Hades itself!" he told the others. "It oozes across the river slowly, but once on this bank it will come as a juggernaut. Get the horses. We ride now!"

The four rode rapidly through the thickening twilight. High above to the north, black specks circled. The keen-eyed ravens watched the progress of the adventurers and conveyed their route to those hidden by the enveloping shroud of vapors. Melf’s group rode on after nightfall, leaving the rutted path and angling cross-country to the west. The pace was easy, for a horse could easily break a leg if ridden hard in such conditions. Every hour they would stop to change horses, walking for a bit, and washing down dry rations with tepid water as they went.

"Let's call a halt here," Melf called softly. "The copse of trees yonder should be suitable for our needs."

Biff, being the least wounded of the party, volunteered to stand watch while the other three slept. Melf had no more than closed his eyes, it seemed, when the halfling's urgent warning brought him to full awareness. "Melf! Come quickly, this way! Something terrible comes this way now… I feel an awful terror in my very bones!"

"Get the others up and armed," Melf replied to the frightened halfling, "while I go to see what the nature of the beast is."

As Melf moved away from the camp, he could hear the quiet sounds of veterans readying for some unknown peril. There were no calls or cursings, only the matter-of-fact noise of armor being donned and weapons unsheathed. Chert and Lizard had been awakened and with Biff were making ready for who knew what. Melf crept to the verge of the grove,

staying well within the shadows, peering in the direction they had come. He too sensed a great, malign presence there.

Peering skyward, the elven mage noted that the starry expanse was blackened and blurred. Then he heard a creaking beat, accompanied by groans and a soughing of the air. His knees shook, and it took all of his will to stand and face what came. Terror washed over him in waves, and something deep inside his mind tried to compel him to scream and fall down in despair. Instead, Melf drew forth a slender wand of adamantite. The ancient metal was engraved with curious squiggles, and the tip bore a pale, milky crystal. He stroked the device and whispered, bringing the crystalline point into luminescence.

"Now let us see what you are," he drawled casually, denying his fear. He inscribed a glowing rectangle in the air before him, and as he completed it the phosphors from the tip of the wand flowed to form a plane of palest violet before him. This effect was duplicated instantly in the air before the oncoming thing, as it flapped and groaned and sent terror in driving waves before it.

An ear-splitting roar shook the trees as the thing struck the magical force thrown up before it by the elven dweomercrafter. Melf looked away from the abomination that the interplay of force and malign magic of the lower regions created when they met. The vaguely batlike daemon was elephantine in size and terrible of visage. It struggled against the screen of energy, tearing madly with mindless fury. As the monstrosity broke through, Melf worked quickly, causing another and yet a third plane offered to spring into magical being.

"May you tear yourself to bits fighting such!" he said vehemently to the unhearing monster. Then he turned and ran to where his companions waited. This was a thing to flee from, not to fight.

The group broke from the trees in a rush, reckless now of rough ground. The mounts galloped without urging, spurred on by the malign waves of fear inspired by the flying daemon from the deepest pits of Hades itself. It seemed as if they would actually escape, for the abomination was still battling the last of Melf’s force walls when they rode away. Soon enough, however, the soughing was all around them again, and with it the stench of vilest evil.

"Now we must dismount and make it pay dearly for our souls," Melf said heavily. Even as they prepared, the heavens were shaken by a triumphant

bellow, and the beating of monstrous pinions resounded from the hills. The four stood in a line facing the onrushing monster conjured from the depths of woe. Each knew this would be his last battle.

Chapter 14

"Parseval's plan is a sound one," Deirdre concluded. "I say we divide our party as he suggests."

"It is stupid!" Gord retorted angrily. "The brigands are riding northward across the frontier region, and you would divert our strength to turn southward!"

More debate followed, while the elven constable sat back with hauteur fixed upon his countenance. The party had traveled to the Kron Hills riding the hippogriffs of Celene's elite chivalry. Parseval and a score of noble guards had accompanied them. Now another matter had arisen.

Upon alighting near the village of Hommlet, a small settlement set around a crossroads, they had been met by the local lord, Burney, titled Worshipful Magus by the Viscount of Verbobonc, and his lieutenant, Sir Rufus of Skipperton. These stalwarts had given the party intelligence on recent events. The band of hard-bitten riders had called themselves free traders. Their leader was a dwarf, with a squint-eyed gnome and a stick-like elfin company. The strength of the brigand assemblage was no more than three dozen of mixed human and demi-human races, and with this band were a string of pack horses and a few small, two-wheeled wains. This information was almost an aside, however.

"They left the village next morning," Sir Rufus told the group. "They left without disturbance, paying for all they had used - food, lodging, supplies. I had them followed by a pair of scouts . . . but these ill-looking 'traders' merely went off down the road to Verbobonc, not doing anything other than travel their way. My men turned back in the afternoon, with the train still heading northward."

"You allowed them to simply ride away?" Deirdre said derisively.

Burney shrugged. "Word of their depredations only reached us yesterday. Besides, I doubt what strength we can muster here would have been sufficient. . ."

"Quite right," Gellor said firmly. "Your duty is to protect this community and to report activities of interest. You have done well by any measure."

"The folk of Welkwood expect us to aid them" Sir Rufus interjected. "But it will take two days to raise the levy and several more to reach the rallying point. Had we attempted to interfere with passersby who made no trouble, where would we be now in this time of need?" he concluded, giving the girl a challenging stare.

Deirdre reacted hotly, her hand upon her sword hilt. "Celebrated as heroes rather than ones who make cautious excuses!" she shot back.

"Dead heroes are unreceptive to celebrations," Curley Greenleaf said dryly. Turning to Parseval and his fellows, the druid inquired, "But you, Lord Constable, might make this your cause."

"The woodsmen of Welkwood are no affair of Celene," said Parseval.

Burney smiled softly and raised a finger. "But it was the elves of that wood who asked our help," he countered.

"What's this?" demanded Lord Parseval.

"As my friend related earlier, Lord Constable, there is a great horde of humanoids and men raging through the Welkwood. They gather up the evil hiding within the forest, gaining strength as they come. Their path has been traced from the Suss Forest far south of here, and it seems they intend to traverse the entire woodlands all the way to the Gnarley."

"These are the very ones who followed us from the start," Oscar observed. "If so," Deirdre added, "we must join with those who oppose them, for such is our duty."

The debate that followed divided the party. Gellor pointed out that the enemy was escaping northward, and that the ravaging horde within the forest was merely a diversion. The cavalier would have none of it, for she saw things in another light. In her estimation, this horde had threatened them. Blonk, undoubtedly one of its minions, had slain Jokotai and the three apprentices of Greenleaf without mercy. Possibly they were moving to reinforce the dwarf-led brigands as well, suggested Deirdre, for none knew for certain that the caravan had not veered eastward - to take shelter within the fastness of the Gnarley Forest until their fellow murderers arrived to assist them! The female cavalier insisted that duty required her to ride to the aid of those who opposed this evil horde, and that those who refused to accompany her had neither honor nor courage.

At this point, the elven constable proposed that he make ready to accompany any force that was bent on bringing the ravagers to battle, for subjects of Celene were involved after all. He and his squadron of hippogriff-mounted warriors would be certain to locate the enemy and bring them to bay. There were mounts, after all, for the party as well, and Deirdre's words were befitting a chivalrous noble of Celene as well as a patriot of Hardby.

"Gord is correct, if tactless," Gellor said. "Our mission is to recover an instrument of most malign power from the clutches of evil. I too would say we must stop the humanoid despoilers from their savagery - were we not otherwise sworn. The greater evil, and the greatest good, lie northward. There we must go."

"Oscar and I go to slay these foul raiders," Deirdre said with finality. "You others can do as you wish."

The one-eyed bard was grim-faced as he nodded. "Then so be it. Let us see who will remain faithful," he said. Deirdre seemed to wince at these words, and Oscar turned away but made no objection to the cavalier's assertion that he would accompany. Parseval and the rest against the horde to the south.

With the disposition of Deirdre and Oscar decided, Gellor turned to the other members of the group and elicited their answers by calling their names.

"Greenleaf?"

"Need you ask?" replied Curley with a wide grin.

"Gord?"

The young thief spat and stepped beside Gellor. "I have pledged myself."

"Incosee?"

The warrior's dark face split into a broad grin. "A Flan soldier remains loyal unto death, One-eye," he said. "And you are my commander."

"Patrick? Moon?"

Moon, as usual, spoke for both of the fighters. "Your orders, Lord Gellor?" he said, and both men saluted sharply toward the bard.

"It is settled, then. We six ride north," said Gellor, allowing himself a thin smile. Then he turned his head toward Deirdre. "I must forgive you, lady, for your decision. I know you follow where you believe your duty lies . . . even though your vision might be somewhat colored at the moment. In any case," Gellor continued brusquely, "Burney, Rufus, and the rest will be glad for your assistance - and the constable's, too, for his force is to be reckoned with." The bard stepped up to Deirdre, shook her hand, and wished her success in her endeavor. He did likewise with Oscar and Lord Parseval.

The remaining six members of the band watched as Deirdre and Oscar mounted up with the elven guards. A pair of these latter warriors went off westward to bring intelligence to the Court at Enstad, taking with them the half-dozen hippogriffs that Gord and the others had ridden thus far. The

aerial cavalry took wing in a thundering of hooves and a rush of great pinions, with neither Deirdre nor Lord Parseval waving a farewell.

"We must hurry after them," Burney said matter-of-factly. "If you will accompany us, good sirs, your horses await at the keep."

Gord and the rest followed the magic-user as he trotted briskly toward the village. Hommlet was a rather unremarkable place, boasting of little more than a good inn, some small shops, a few houses, and a strong tower recently erected under the supervision of Sir Rufus and the magus. As Burney had said, there were a number of swift horses awaiting them in the paddock outside the keep. That place was aswarm with activity, for the militia from all over the area was gathering there. The party could spare no time for any of this, and soon all six were mounted and heading away from the arming village, seeking the trail of the reavers.

"I like not this lessening of our strength," Incosee confided to Gord. "Our number was scant enough at the outset. Now a dozen is but six, and our spell-worker is amongst the missing!"

"Treachery took four, fickleness the balance," replied Gord bitterly. "Both are foul. Still, both Gellor and Greenleaf are able users of the recondite arts."

"Still," countered Incosee, "I dislike losing our wizard, for dweomers of his sort are more potent in battle than those of priestly sort."

For one claiming to be but a plain warrior, Incosee displayed uncommon astuteness in matters of spells. Gord looked at him with new respect as they rode. "And what of the cavalier?" he asked his companion.

"A fearless and puissant fighter, no doubt. I would have Deirdre as a weapon-mate in any battle. It is her cousin, though, who was to enable us to come to sword strokes with the foe," Incosee said. "And that is why I speak as I do."

"Why refer to Oscar as Deirdre's cousin?" Gord said with a puzzled expression.

Incosee looked at Gord for a moment, reading his expression carefully. "I thought you knew," he said. "The two have a fair reputation along the Wild Coast. Their grandmother was a noble of the Court of Hardby. The town of Safeton abducted her, and when no ransom was paid as demanded, the Szek had her publicly executed as an object lesson."

"And then?"

Incosee shrugged and continued. "The two grew and came to the Szek's town one day. Nobody knew their identity, and when they did, it was too late. The next day, Safeton had a new ruler and the family Longland of Hardby was avenged. Ransoming is no longer so popular with the masters of Safe-ton, either."

Gord said nothing to that, and the two rode in silence until it was time to encamp for the night.

Eventually they came upon the place where the dwarf had fallen upon the pilgrim train and had slain most of the hapless folk. It was near sunset when they discovered the grisly remains of the slaughter. Vultures and crows squawked and flapped angrily away as the six riders came upon the sheltered glen.

"Not long dead," Moon pronounced after examining several of the corpses.

"Aye, these murders were done this very day," agreed Patrick.

"The bastards are not far ahead then. Let us ride around and see if there are any signs of survivors," Greenleaf said. "If you, my friend will take the right," he said to the ashen-faced bard, "i will take the left."

Gellor nodded, and they rode into the scrub and tall grass. Gellor, Gord, and Incosee went to the right, while the druid, Moon, and Patrick took the opposite side. Although they were careful, Gellor's group could not find a single trace of anyone who had fled the massacre. Soon it was too dark to continue, so Gellor signaled for the three of them to return to the road. With Gord leading the way out of the underbrush, they came back onto the road about a hundred yards from the site of the murders.

"Here come the others!" Gord called excitedly to his comrades. "And they have someone with them!" This was plainly evident, for a total of five figures were walking up the well-used way, with the adventurers' three horses being led behind.

After moving on a sufficient distance to remove themselves not only from proximity to the bodies but also from predatory beasts attracted to the carnage, the six hard-bitten adventurers made camp and examined their new charges. One was a girl of eleven or so, the other a boy about two years younger. Both were pale and silent. The husky druid patted them fondly and spoke in his most affable voice.

"I know you have been through a terrible experience, and if possible we would have aided you to prevent the murders. That isn't possible, but if you

can tell us what happened, we will try to bring the culprits to justice." Here Curley Greenleaf paused and looked at each of the children. "Do you understand?"

The boy only stared back, but the girl spoke. "Yes. Please help us. . . ." she whimpered, her voice trailing off.

Incosee offered the two some hard biscuits and sharp yellow cheese. The children accepted the food woodenly but then devoured it ravenously, for they had not eaten all day. Moon proffered his wineskin, demonstrating how good the stuff was before the children drank. Now somewhat refreshed, the girl spoke in a voice that was steadier but still very quiet.

"I am Isobel, and this is my brother, Franz," she began. "We came all the way from Urnst, sailing across the Nyr Dyv to Dyvers. Mother died, you know, so Father took us with him on a pilgrimage to Mitrik in Veluna. But now Father is dead, too. . . ."

Gellor placed his cloak around the girl's shoulders. "He was a good man, I am certain," said the bard in a gentle tone. "Now he has no more troubles to bear. You must think now of yourself and your brother. Life goes on for you, and you must tell us of these murderers."

Isobel stifled a sob and spoke with trembling lips. "It happened just as everybody was waking up and getting ready to travel. Franz and I went into the bushes to ... well, you know. . . ." She hesitated a moment, not wanting to recall what occurred but realizing she must. "I heard a cry, a scream, and awful laughing too. Franz started to run to the camp to see what was the matter, but I held him back."

"We both hid under some bushes," the boy interjected. "One of the men guarding the caravan was running toward us - he had an arrow through his arm, and someone on a horse was chasing him!"

"I didn't want to watch, but I had to," Isobel said, picking up the story. "The guard didn't get very far. There was a dwarf riding after him, and he threw an awful hammer at the poor fellow. It hit him on the back and knocked him down. The dwarf just sat there. We didn't move or make a sound."

Franz nodded, adding, "He was holding the big hammer again - it flew right back to him after it killed the guard. The dwarf was going to get off his horse, but a laughing elf came running up just then. He was giggling about how they had murdered everybody!"

"No, that's not right," Isabel corrected her brother. "They talked about killing everyone except the ones they'd keep to sell as slaves."

"Did this dwarf and the laughing elf have names?" asked Gellor, "Think carefully."

"Oh, yes, sir," the boy said eagerly. "The dwarf was called Lord Obmi, and the nasty elf was Geek."

"Keak," the boy's sister said in a tone that indicated she was used to correcting him.

"What happened then?" the one-eyed bard gently prompted the girl.

"We stayed hidden," said Isobel. "A man came and searched the body of the dead guard. He stripped it and took everything. We stayed put for a long time, but finally there was no more sound for a long time. We got up and looked for Father. . . ." At this, her voice trailed off, and she looked down.

"Then we decided to find some water and see if we could get something to eat too," Franz said, taking up the narrative and pretending his sister was not crying. "That's when you found us."

"We will camp here for the night," Greenleaf told the party. "Tomorrow we'll do what we can for the dead and then get these younglings to a safe place." All the others nodded a grim agreement.

There was a sanctuary of Rao in the nearby town of Little-berg. They left the newly orphaned youngsters there with sufficient coin to see to their welfare until an uncle could be notified and come for them. Gord made a point of promising the two, and Franz in particular, that he would serve as their avenger Isobel looked away, but the boy gritted his teeth and clasped Cord's arm.

"How will I know? Otherwise I must seek these murderers out myself."

"I will send you word, somehow - and proof, too!" the young adventurer replied earnestly. "This holy place will know where you have gone, and one of their brethren will carry word to you and your sister wherever you are."

"Thanks." Franz whispered. "But I wish I was big and strong enough to go with you." Gord, thinking of his own youth, shook his head and said firmly, "Such is not for you, lad, not now - or ever, if you can help it. Rest easy though, for once I pledge myself, I do not flinch from the vow. You will hear from me!" And with that, Gord turned and walked away. Brother and sister stood and watched him until he was out of sight.

Chapter 15

The group divided and began combing the town for information. There was nothing to be learned about the caravan. No train even remotely resembling the description they gave had entered. Littleberg, then, was not the place where the brigands had come with their pillaged goods and slaves - small wonder, upon reflection. That evening they questioned barkeeps, ostlers, and tavern owners. One, with sufficient prompting of drink and copper, recalled that he had seen an odd group heading to the north only yesterday. It seemed a long shot, but the clue was the only one to follow. They took rooms at the tavern, and at first light next morning the six rode northward.

There was no hope, of course, of actually tracking the caravan of reavers, for the traffic was heavy along the highway that ran northward alt the way to Chendl. They passed several villages and dorps during the morning without coming upon any caravan of substance, although there were farm carts, wagons, and pack trains aplenty.

"If they are but a day's distance, my friends," Gellor said, "we shall catch them by nightfall - unless their draught beasts are winged! Let us press on."

Ride they did, and by nightfall they had found nothing. The town of Fountainspring was only a league or so farther, a helpful teamster related, so they rode through the gloaming and arrived before the gates were shut for (he night. The place was a thriving agricultural marketplace, newly arrived at its status. Even its walls were only half completed, and there were many greens and commons still within the town center and the fortifications. Although the residents of Fountain-spring could scarcely number two thousand, there were a number of inns and hostels for travelers, so accommodations were no problem.

"A pleasant little community," Incosee remarked.

"This is no time to think of settling down for a stay, even a brief one!" Greenleaf admonished sternly.

The Flan warrior laughed mirthlessly. "A wandering sellsword only thinks of putting down roots, never does it," he said.

Gord was practical. "Why talk?" he said with mild irritation. "A drink, some food, and a bed are needed - in that order. What else is (here to do in a town of yokels such as this?"

They managed to bathe and get fresh garments as well before the searchers set out again next day. It was evident that they had missed their

quarry somewhere between Fountain-spring and Littleberg. Neither town militia nor southbound travelers had seen a trace of a caravan such as Gellor inquired of. Cursing about the time they had wasted, the six retraced their route toward Littleberg. In the afternoon they discovered that the train of demi-humans and hard-eyed men had crossed the Att River but a half-score of miles above Littleberg at the place called the Broad Ford. The main channel of the Att was to the east, and was spanned by a high bridge that enabled the river traffic to pass unhindered. To reach this crossing, however, a great shallow branch of the river had to be forded.

"An oddly tilted island, that," Moon said to no one in particular.

"I recall that I have been this way once, now that I see the place," said Incosee. "The deep channel passes through a rock-walled ravine, and it has worn the stone in such a manner as to make a half-bridge of natural rock. The rest was finished a century ago. It is broad enough for two large wagons to pass each other!"

Gord hunkered down in his traveling cloak. "It would be a wonderful place to see, I'm sure, if this filthy rain would ever cease," he grumbled.

The water was high, another wayfarer remarked, but the ford was no real problem, and soon the six men were on the eastern side of the Att, their horses plodding through the sheets of precipitation. The rain soon became torrential, and despite the best efforts of Gellor and the druid, they lost their way. Knowing that there was no hope of continued pursuit under such conditions, they decided to halt early that day and spent a miserable twilight and night in a wet encampment.

Bad weather persisted, but they slogged ahead through the progressively more deserted and wild countryside. Although the terrain was predominantly flat, there were swampy patches and many small ponds and lakes, fed and drained by streamlets and creeks. Rocky outcroppings and knobby hills thrust up here and there from the plain. The scarcity of trees in the area was from a poor, acidic soil rather than from the clearing of timber for lumbering or agriculture.

"See yon woodlands?" Curley Greenleaf said with a cheerful note in his voice. "With sun and trees, I think our fortune is changing for the better!"

"The land here is different," Gellor agreed, "and I believe we are nearing the Veng."

The six horsemen were moving along the narrow, rutted track that wound its way to the only fording place shown on the bard's map. The Veng was a

broad and deep river, and there was little commerce with the land to the north; thus, the condition of the road and the lack of habitation.

A sudden movement caught Incosee's attention. "I saw a figure - a man, I think!" the Flan warrior called out softly to the rest.

Although Incosee did not point or give any indication of where he had seen movement, Gord had seen his head move. The young thief was keen-eyed and quick-witted. Without seeming to scan the area, Gord did so, and then added to Incosee's report. "There are armed men and probably women, too," he said. "I saw the glint of metal and a flash of bright skirt as well."

Gellor didn't turn as he called back to them. "Make no motion or gesture that indicates our sighting," he told the others.

"Ride on as if you were totally unaware of these skulkers. When we hit the trees we'll dismount and work to the left."

The six were soon screened by the trees of the small woods that the road cut through. Although the patch of trees and scrub was no more than two hundred yards wide, it ran for about double that distance lengthwise. The hidden group had been near the end of the western verge of the woods. It was obvious that they sought secrecy, not an opportunity to ambush the riders. The other adventurers followed Gellor's example, dismounting quickly and leading their mounts through the growth. The ground was relatively free of underbrush here, for the trees were large and had heavy foliage - oaks, maples, and a few towering usks. After a short distance, the bard and the druid gave over their animals to Patrick and Moon, telling Incosee and Gord to do likewise.

"Stay here with the mounts," commanded the one-eyed bard, "but be ready to come at my whistle or our call."

Patrick nodded, and he and his fellow mercenary moved to an open space near the edge of the woods as the other four members of the party moved stealthily ahead.

"Hsst! There are a dozen people just ahead," said Green-leaf as he suddenly appeared before Gord and the Flan fighting man. "Gellor and I will move right and left. You two wait a minute, and then advance as quietly as deer to the edge of the clearing they are in - move straight ahead, and be ready for combat."

Incosee gave his mirthless smile and hefted his barbed spear meaningfully. Gord said nothing but drew forth his sling. The half-elven druid disappeared, demonstrating his ranger skills as he did so.

"Fighting elves in such country would be bad enough," Incosee said softly. "But such as the round one there are worse still. I think this band of hidden folk ahead are in big trouble if they prove to be enemies."

Gord agreed. "This fighting is of the sort which Gellor and Curley are most adept at. I prefer streets and alleys."

The Flan warrior winked, and Gord grinned back. The time for waiting was about up, and they crept forward with almost no betraying noise. The pair crouched as they worked their way up a slight ridge, then fell prone as they reached its crest. The area on the other side was an open meadow about fifty feet in diameter. In the clearing were horses, men, and a group of disheveled women in the process of picking up bundles. Their attitudes and the watchful men nearby indicated that they were captives, not companions, of the rough-looking lot.

The two men watched unseen for several minutes. Then Incosee looked at Gord questioningly, for the group was preparing to leave the clearing with a handful of mounted men leading the way, and the female prisoners and their burdens ringed by another half-dozen or so men on foot.

"Do we attack?" he asked the young thief softly.

Gord shook his head. "Wait for Gellor or Greenleaf to act," he replied as quietly.

Just as the brigands were moving out of the clearing toward the south, the one-eyed bard appeared suddenly and stood, arms akimbo, barring the path of the horsemen. "Hold there!" he cried. "Throw down your arms and surrender, or you shall be the sorrier!"

The demand was certainly loud enough for Moon and Patrick to hear, and Gord knew that the two fighters would soon come to the support of their fellows. Meanwhile, he wondered, what was Gellor planning? He dashed to a position behind a nearby oak, and Incosee took a similar station even closer to the group while the brigands' attention was fixed on the bearded man who had so mysteriously appeared before them.

"What?" the evident leader of the band cried, reining his horse so that it danced and pranced sideways. "Who are you, jackanapes, to demand anything?!"

Gellor pointed with his left arm, indicating the edge of the little glen. "Observe, lout!" he countered, and as he spoke, a great thicket of briars and brambles sprang into being so as to entirely seal off the western edge of the

place. "I am a patient man, but this sloth begins to pall - get off those horses and throw down your weapons, now!"

The crossbowmen among the unmounted brigands were moving slowly so as to be able to fire at this lone adversary. Left unwatched, the dozen or so women and girls began to move backward. A gap between captors and captives was developing rapidly, Gord saw, and he realized this was what Gellor and Greenleaf had desired lo accomplish. Just then the captain of the band gave a battle-shout and spurred his steed ahead, directly at the one-eyed bard.

"Die!" screamed the beefy brigand, slashing at Gellor with a heavy falchion and rearing his horse so as to make it flail with its forehooves.

Gellor merely stepped in close, darting lo the left side of the frenzied animal. "Fall!" he bellowed in reply to the brigand as he grabbed the man's left leg, jerked it from the stirrup, and heaved. The surprised brigand flew up and backward to land with a jarring thud. His horse screamed and galloped off. Gellor stood once again with arms akimbo before the prancing mounts of the four remaining horsemen.

Gord saw that the arbalesters were almost in a position to bring their weapons to bear upon his comrade. "Now! We must show ourselves!" he called to Incosee.

As the two stood forth from behind the trees on the little ridge, they made sufficient noise to draw attention to themselves. The captives saw them first, dropped their bundles, and fled eastward away from the brigands confronting Gellor. This seemed to serve as a signal for Greenleaf to act. He appeared at the far edge of the clearing, and the frightened escapees swirled left and right around him, shrieking in alarm. All this commotion caused the outlaws to spin and look to their flanks and rear. A quarrel buzzed past Gord and imbedded itself in the oak beside the Flan warrior.

Suddenly Gellor's sword was out and flashing. A rider who had turned his head at the distraction uttered a howl of pain as the blade bit into his arm. The flail he had formerly held ready fell to the turf, and the wounded brigand's horse ran into another animal and kicked at a second. All was now total chaos.

"That was Greenleafs work!" shouted Gord as a blossom of fire erupted in the midst of the crouching crossbowmen.

"I saw him hurl something," said Incosee with a grunt of effort as he heaved his heavy spear at a charging brigand.

Gord replied as he let fly an egg-sized stone at the same man. "The druid uses fire seeds - he told me of the magic."

Both adventurers were drawing their shortswords even as they exchanged more comments. They dispatched the wounded brigand and ran to engage the others below. As Gord and Incosee charged down the gentle slope, Patrick and Moon burst from the trees, urging their horses to a trot, and another of the druid's enchanted missiles sent forth its fiery tongues. This was ail too much for the outlaws. Those on foot or dismounted threw down their weapons and cried for quarter. Two horsemen managed to get past the bard's whirling sword, however, and rode away without concern for their fellows.

"Ride them down!" Gellor boomed to the two mounted mercenaries. " Bring them back alive or dead!" Moon and his companion complied immediately and likewise disappeared into the trees in pursuit.

The four other adventurers rounded up the surviving brigands. There were ten in all, eight of them wounded, and four of those near death. Only two of the opponents had been killed. Greenleaf actually ministered to the mortally injured outlaws, and in a few minutes it was clear that they would now survive their wounds.

"What about those prisoners?" Gord called.

"They won't wander far in the next quarter hour," the half-elven druid replied as he finished his healing work.

"Moon and Patrick should be back by then, and we'll have this lot ready for a march. We'll all go after those women, and find out how they came to be captives of this lot."

Gellor eyed the cowed brigands coldly. "Pray they condemn you not, or your deaths will be hard. . . . Have any of you anything to say?"

Gord and Incosee were just finishing binding the hands of the outlaw prisoners when Patrick and Moon returned. They bore red badges of battle, but behind them they led the horses of the two brigands who had attempted to escape. The bodies of the pair were slung across their steeds' saddles. The prisoners got one look at this and began a flood of confessions, explanations, and pleas. A few kicks and shakes silenced the babble, and then organized questioning began. 'The bound outlaws were frog-marched, one at a time, to stand alone and tell what they knew to Gellor. This was done out of sight and earshot of die rest. After each brigand was finished with, he was taken to a place in the woods. Gord stood guard over these

men as they came. The outlaws, not knowing the fate of their comrades, spoke progressively more factually and to the point. After the seventh man of the ten was questioned, Gellor had the full picture.

"Gord!" called the bard. "Bring the lot of dogs back to the clearing." The young thief quickly herded the sullen group of brigands back to join their fellows, and Gellor spoke to the entire group.

"I know that you served with the vile dwarf, Obmi, and his henchmen Keak the elf and Gleed, a gnome," the one-eyed man said to the prisoners. The brigands stood defiantly now. "I also know that you slew and burned, looted and raped, from the far side of the Suss Forest all the way to here. These deeds are sufficient for your death warrants, each and every one of you!"

The sullen faces were more pale after this statement, but there was no other reaction. Gellor went on, as much for the benefit of his associates as for other reasons.

"The ambush and destruction of your former company is none of our doing," said the bard, "but I applaud those who brought your band so low. Now ready yourselves. We will find the prisoners who fled from you and tell them they are free. You will run before us - and woe to any who stumble, for they will not rise again! Thereafter, you will serve as our shield as we seek other survivors of your foul band."

The druid had rounded up the horses, numbering eleven now with the addition of those of the brigands, which were standing quietly with the coursers ridden by the adventurers. The six mounted, weapons unsheathed and ready. Trotting before them went the half-score outlaws, their hands thonged securely behind their backs. Just as they left the wooded area, however, they saw the former captives running toward them. The northern sky was dark, and an inky black cloud stained the horizon.

"Help! Help!" the women cried as they approached. A dozen giant ravens wheeled and croaked above the women, but something far worse had brought them to such a state of panic.

"We are friends!" called the druid. "Your former captors are now our prisoners. How can we help?" There was no hesitation. The dozen women and girls came directly up to the party, ignoring the brigands, who had been herded into a clump by Moon and Incosee. Gord noted that although they were dirty and worn, the former captives were all well-formed and good

looking. Prime candidates for slavery indeed, the young thief thought. One of their number shouted for silence and spoke to Greenleaf.

"Gaunt horses come at us, druid, and terrible baying from inside the black mists. The riders are inhuman and the calls send terror to the marrow of the bone - these are yeth hounds!"

How she knew of these fell creatures, Greenleaf couldn't guess, but what she said seemed true enough. He gestured toward the riderless horses. "Each of these spare mounts will carry two of you," he said to the spokeswoman. "You will ride with me. And the girl," he continued, pointing to a frail brunette hardly more than a child, "rides behind that man there - Gord."

The frightened females complied readily. Gord said nothing, merely smiled and extended a hand to help her up.

"Your friends approach, I think," Gellor called to the ten brigands. "Run to greet them, or else we will ride you down and slay you all here and now!"

Two of the outlaws cried for mercy, and several others demanded to have their hands freed and be given weapons. A few blows with spear butt and sword flat silenced these pleadings and demands. The brigands began trotting away toward the gathering gloom, unwilling but afraid of the threat of instant death. The party sat for a moment, watching the men. When one started to turn back, Incosee leveled his spear and brought his horse forward at a trot. The brigand swerved and began loping toward the black fog again. His fellows likewise began running. Incosee turned his mount, and the whole party went away down the trail at a canter.

As they moved, Gord shouted to his fellows. "There are worse than the yeth in that doom. Hades has unleashed its whole pack!"

"What? How know you this?" Gellor called back with doubt.

"I could see into the blackness," Gord replied emphatically. "How? I know not, but the vision was as clear as if I saw through eagle eyes, it was so close."

"Never mind how," interrupted Greenleaf. "What did you see? "

The young thief grimly described his vision. "Many of the things I saw were unknown to me - great and malign creatures of foul aspect. I saw three men on nightgaunts . . . that name sprang into my brain as if placed there. They were the chiefest of the Hierarchs. Around them swarmed the hounds of Hades, yeth and more deadly dogs still. Hags and hulking giants

marshalled a host of hobgoblins and lesser humanoids in their thousands. All were poised to march at the Hierarchs' command. Ravens and bats are the scouts and messengers of this evil horde, and they report our proximity even now."

"This is fearsome news," said the druid. "But your seeing was certainly granted to you by some power opposed to these hideous minions of Hades."

"What else did you see?" demanded Gellor, looking fixedly at Gord as they rode.

Gord met the one-eyed bard's piercing gaze. "The center-most of the three Hierarchs pointed southwest. The other two gestured. I saw dragonhide drums being beaten, and I felt the rumble through the very ground. On the other hand, iron horns were winded, and the ebon vapors seethed and billowed at the bellowing. They are advancing, but they seek something to the west of us. If we ride due south, we will avoid this terrible horde."

The others had heard the whole exchange. All looked at Gellor to see his reaction. He was silent for a minute, then spoke.

"We will follow this track until the women are safe. Then Patrick and his friend, Moon, will escort them onward. The rest of us will turn westward and ride to the coming battle, for more than our lives depends on it!"

Chapter 16

Blue Celene showed only her slender crescent high above amidst the myriad icy-colored lights that sprinkled the vast welkin in a crystalline wonder. The air was soft and warm, and the breeze smelled of night-flowering blooms and growing herbs. Across a prairie meadow dimly lit by the glimmerings of the heavens walked four men, leading tired horses. The extended wing of the Eldest Griffon pointed behind them to their left. From their occasional pauses to check this constellation, it was evident that the four were guided in their course by the stars. They traveled a little south of west, walking rapidly despite the lateness of the hour.

"Rest," Gellor told the others.

The druid heaved a grateful sigh, for the rotund half-elf was exhausted from traveling and spell-working. Gord, twenty years his junior, was too proud to utter any sound of relief, but he was just as glad for the pause. The wiry Flan warrior bringing up the rear seemed to stride on long, tireless legs, Incosee merely grunted acknowledgement, allowed the reins he held to drop, and sat squatting on his heels. His steed began grazing with its three fellows, snorting in pleasure as it tore mouthfuls of the dewy grass and consumed them.

"How long?" asked Gord.

Gellor spoke in a low voice. "Fifteen minutes - a half-hour if our pudgy friend insists, but no longer," he answered. "Those we seek to aid cannot be far distant. We are bound to do our utmost to find them."

"Whoever they are," added Greenleaf, as he stretched himself on the ground and placed his hands behind his head.

"At least we are not pursued by the yeth and their foul masters," Gord noted, "so there is much hope."

Curley Greenleaf harrumphed. "Not for those we seek. They have no such luxury, I fear, and if we should find them we must be prepared to face this malign enemy!"

"Quiet, you two! Who knows what might be listening!" Gellor was nervous and edgy to speak thus, and the three with him understood and refrained from comment thereafter.

Gord was dozing, a catnap where full alertness was but an eye-blink away. Greenleaf hummed between meditation and snore. Incosee had fallen into instant slumber. Only the one-eyed bard remained fully alert. His touch brought Gord to instant alertness. The young thief saw at once that Gellor

had doffed his eyepatch, and his enchanted ocular glittered in the place where his normal eye had once been.

"Look there to the west, just above the horizon," he urged in a whisper. "What do you see?"

"Let me hold my sword," Gord answered quietly, reaching for the dweomered weapon.

Gellor's hand gripped his own. "No, just use your unaided vision, just as you did when you saw into the gloom yesterday. Tell me if you notice anything."

Gord moved uneasily and peered into the sky, scanning the area indicated by his friend. After a moment he said, "I see nothing... Wait! There are bats, scores of giant bats! They are flying northward in a stream!" As he spoke, his whisper rose to a louder tone as excitement overcame the young thief.

"More?" prompted the bard. Greenleaf was awake and listening now, as was the Flan fighter.

"Yes. There is something huge and terrible toward which they fly. But I can't look at it ... it is like coals searing my eyes!" Gord gasped.

"You must look! Tell us what it does, this monstrous abomination," and as Gellor said that he placed his palms reassuringly upon Cord's shoulders.

Gord forced his eyes to the spot again. "It is a winged behemoth of Hades!" choked the young adventurer. "Upon its back is one whose name must not be spoken - the Master of the Hierarchs. The winged horror is horrible - and its rider is worse!"

"As I feared," Gellor said to his friends. "Yet even my enchanted orb revealed but little of this to me. Lefus pray that the power you have to see such evil things will help us to combat them. Gather yourselves and prepare to fight those creatures from the pits!"

Without speaking, each of the four made swift preparations. The druid handed Gord two unusually heavy acorns, saying, "The Oaken Concatenation schooled me in certain special arts. These dear acorns are still potent, and will remain so for some hours yet. Cast them truly with your sling, comrade!"

Gord tucked the pair of missiles in his pouch and thanked the druid. "As surely as I can, old friend, and with a supplication too."

The horses moved well enough. The half-hour of rest and grazing had refreshed them somewhat, but they couldn't be run hard without risk of killing them, whether from fall or exhaustion. As they rode at a slow trot,

Gord considered his course in the coming engagement. First he would try the fire-seed missiles given him by the druid, for they were potent. Thereafter, he thought, he would put aside his sling. He had no supply of magicked bullets to employ, and against opponents such as those he had somehow seen, ordinary missiles of lead or stone would be useless. What then? Sword and dagger were good enough against most opponents, but Gord thought he'd find scant use for his blades . . . not immediately, anyway, only at the last. At that thought he could not suppress a shudder. "Think, man!" he commanded himself.

He rubbed his hand across his face unconsciously. A tiny spark of light shot from his hand to his eye, a glimmering of starshine caught and reflected from the cat's-eye chrysoberyl of his ring. With that glint came a jolt of memory. He reached into his pouch, a magical case that could contain far more material than its outer dimensions would suggest. Gord recalled a parchment scroll taken from the vampiric Plincourt some time back when he had plied his craft in the byways of Greyhawk. He had tucked it away and forgotten it for several reasons. Perhaps this was something he could use!

"What are you rummaging for?" asked Incosee, awe in his voice as he noticed a foot of Gord's arm buried within a pouch no more than six inches deep.

The young thief dug deeper still, saying, "Some small tool to confuse the enemy ... I hope!"

"Oh," said the Flan soldier noncommittally, still eyeing the pouch.

Gord ignored his stare and soon found the roll of (hick stuff he sought. Before drawing it carefully forth, he looped reins around cantle so as to have both hands free. Unrolling it cautiously, Gord peered at the writings that he discerned clearly despite the faint illumination.

The page was covered in magical ideograms, interspersed with certain arcane signs and sigils surrounding a cryptic diagram and runic grid of power. Gord breathed a great sigh of relief, for the thing contained neither trap nor curse. It was a recondite writing of great power! After puzzling over the page for several minutes, the young adventurer looked up with his face wreathed in a smile.

"This scroll I hold is a work of marvelous fortuity!" he cried to his comrades. "This holds the key to deal with that unnameable one - it is a banishment."

The others reined in, and Curley Greenleaf came near to Gord. "I am no dweomercrafter, but I will examine that parchment, if I may, Gord."

Gord agreed readily, handing the crinkly scroll to the half-elf. Greenleaf peered intently, saying, "Not so fast, my friends. I can make out but little of this stuff, but this I do know. The spell writ hereon is aimed at stuff of Evil, but is most puissant when used against those of Negative Plane power."

There was no sense disputing the words of the druid, for he knew the symbols of the nine alignments as surely as any cas-socked priest.

"Tell me how you came to possess this scroll," Gellor said urgently.

Gord complied, briefly relating a strange encounter in a strange place. "Then," the young thief said to his comrade, "we learned the extent of our folly, for many unexpected and unpleasant things befell us thereafter. Still," Gord said reflectively, "this may be reward and more for what was lost. . . ."

"Perhaps," the bard said slowly, "but be not over-quick to rely on it. You yourself, Gord, are worth more than even the greatest of spells when danger must be faced."

"The one we must oppose is a malign and powerful being, but he is not so all-powerful as you might attribute," avowed the druid a little peevishly.

"What is our situation now, damnit?" growled Incosee. "Are we stopping or riding? Talking? What?"

Gord grinned at the dark warrior, for his point was well taken.

"We are riding, Incosee," said the bard. "But we are better prepared now than before."

"Not a moment too soon, either," Greenleaf interjected. "Look!"

Ahead and just a little to the right, a strange, shimmering plane suddenly lit up the sky. A dark, bulky form struck the plane of luminousness and a soul-wrenching shriek followed. As the deep bellow reverberated, the plane of light fell away in coruscating shards that dimmed and went out before they touched the ground. Even as this occurred, a second and then a third of the planes appeared before the great blob of utter darkness.

"It is the great daemonkin and its master!" cried Gord as he kicked his horse into a run. "They have come for the souls of those in the grove ahead!"

The other three quickly followed, and in a minute all were streaming toward the stand of trees a few hundred yards distant. They were almost to the copse when the last of the planes of phosphorescent force broke, and a wave of terror struck them as a mighty breaker washes the shore.

Gord vaulted out of his saddle. The near-palpable fear that swirled around him had no effect upon his mind, but his horse was terrified and uncontrollable. Rather than try to fight the creature's panic and waste valuable seconds, the young thief abandoned the beast to its fate. He hit the ground running and in a dozen strides reached the grove.

The druid used his power to soothe and quiet his steed, and Gellor, likewise skilled in the arts of nature, used similar power to do the same for his horse. Both adventurers were as heedless as Gord was of the mindless panic radiating from the horror from the depths of Hades. The projected terror simply had no effect upon either Greenleaf or the bard - but not so Incosee.

First there was a moment of frozen struggle during which the Flan warrior locked his mind upon his mission and denied all fear. His courser was rigid beneath him, Incosee's legs holding its barrel in a viselike grip. Then the horse screamed, reared, and came down wide its legs madly pumping.

Perhaps it was his effort to keep his seat and control the animal, perhaps not. Whatever the cause, Incosee was suddenly as crazed with panic as the horse that bore him. Man and animal, both crazed and screaming, went into the night.

Just as he was about to plunge in among the trees, Gord heard voices. The steeds of four riders were moving away from the copse, the horses running in reckless abandon but under control of those who rode them. Gord shouted a curse of frustration and ran southwest after the horsemen. A groaning of awful aspect nearly deafened him, and he was almost knocked off his feet as the wind from the monstrous flying daemon buffeted the ground beneath. He smelled a terrible stench, felt an ache in every nerve in his body, and then the utter blackness was gone from above Gord's head.

Despite himself, the young adventurer looked up and saw the true forms of steed and master. Retching and spitting bile, Gord stumbled on. He could see the distant figures of dismounted men - one must be a gnome or halfling from its size, he knew - preparing to make a stand against the horror approaching them.

Hooves pounded behind him. "Now, Gord!" shouted Gellor as he and Greenleaf stopped their horses. "If you have ever read quickly and true, do so now. The scroll - use it!"

"I know not the names of daemon or rider!" Gord shouted in reply as he readied the parchment. "The master of the thing is Nerull himself," Gellor said as he dismounted, "and the daemon is called Putriptoq - true name or not!"

"Call upon any names your heart knows are inimical to those of Evil," Curley Greenleaf added desperately as he himself prepared to unleash his own spell powers. "Neither of us can aid you now," he said, and the druid turned to face the lightless mass that besmirched the ground but a hundred paces distant.

As his comrades began to work what spells they could to bring woe to such fell adversaries, Gord could not refrain from glancing quickly at the scene before him. His extraordinary new vision enabled him to see clearly, but he focused on the four men being held at bay, not upon the nauseating pair who attacked them. One of those he saw was a giant of a man hefting a huge axe. Gord nearly started and dropped the precious scroll. That was Chert! His mind screamed at him to run to stand and die fighting at his friend's side, but reason held Gord in check.

Rays and bolts of unnameable colors were playing upon the ghastly figure and its murderous mount, as quarrels and sling bullets flew at them. Gord heard the one called The Reaper give vent to peals of sepulchral laughter at these efforts, and the evil rider spoke in a hellish voice.

"Now I claim you all for my flock, nigglings," Nerull boomed as he flew from the huge, winged daemon-thing. "Your souls and the Second Key shall be my gifts to He Who Will Awaken!"

This Gord heard, but he was unmindful of the meaning. Neither did he think of the beast or of Nerull's scythe. Gord had begun to read the twisting and writhing lines inscribed on the sheet of ancient parchment.

If the rider was impervious to the attacks of the beleaguered party, not so the daemon Putriptoq. It was stung by the spells and missiles. It lunged its titanic bulk forward, furious at the affront and ravening to crush and tear and devour those who dared to hurt him so. This fury saved the four defenders, for the monster's rush prevented The Reaper from plying his weapon.

"Be still!" Nerull commanded the winged behemoth. The thing felt the searing pain of the scythe, though the contact was a mere touch. Cowed, Putriptoq drew back and huddled its bulk upon itself. Then Nerull stepped to the fore.

All the while, Gord had been reciting the near unpronounceable words of the banishment spell. His eyes burned, and his tongue felt as if it were possessed by a serpent. Beads of sweat sprang from his forehead and ran into his eyes while his hands shook and water seemed to fill his knees. He invoked the names of the deities Celestian and Fharlanghn, and Rao from dimly remembered prayers of childhood, as the text demanded that beings of power be called upon. Gord tried to shout forth the spell, but his mouth was dry and his voice cracked, and the words seemed to be mere croakings and guttural, meaningless mumblings to his straining ears.

"This takes an eternity. You are too late!" one part of the young thief s mind babbled. Somehow he ignored the thought and read the scroll to its finish. The conclusion nearly gagged him, his throat was so raw, and the words brought agony to Gord's whole being.

"Ehlohum, XetorMudeelsa, Adonai . . . Rexfelis!" Gord shouted the conclusion, adding the name of the Cat Lord for good measure, for it seemed that one had certainly aided him in his quest.

A colorless sheet of nothingness descended before Gord's eyes. His mind closed upon itself and went blank.

A terrible wail spread outward from Nerull. The daemon beast took up the sound, and it became a groaning bellow that echoed and rebounded upon hill and plain, over meadow and marsh, piercing woodland and valley for a league - and was even faintly heard in Krebalsthorp a score of miles away. The earth was blasted from the spot as thunder boomed and lightning beat a frenzied tattoo roundabout, while tornadic winds howled and roared so that no vegetation within a mile stood whole and green when their work was finished. Rocks split and smoke shot from great fissures. Flames sprang from the very air to whirl and dance and consume, but even these ravening tongues were whipped and shredded to nothingness by the fury of the whirlwinds. There was a clap of sound as if iron had been slammed upon iron by two angry giants...

...And then, there was nothing save the scoured, ruined land.

Chapter 17

The lord of pain danced in glee through the great halls of his palace in Dorakaa. Those who served Iuz hid from his sight, lest he suddenly change his mood and punish those who viewed his gloating cavort. Iuz laughed and jeered and pranced, knowing the fear these actions evoked in his minions, and the feeling doubled his joy.

"Fonkin, frightface, foul boy! You are naught but My own root!" he called, mimicking children's rhymes as he pranced in step to his own ditty. After a time, though, Iuz tired of his vaunting. It was gladsome to his vile heart, but enough! There was much yet to do.

Iuz sent forth a thought: "Attend Me instantly!" Then he sprawled his corpulent bulk upon his chair of bones and skulls and awaited the coming of those who served him.

"Lord of Ancient Evil, your servants attend their Master," said a woman of indeterminate years who wore vestments of rust red trimmed in black. In her hand was an ebon staff bound with silver and topped with a silver-set skull, an object indicating her status as High Priestess.

Six heads bowed before him. "You are the Greater Six, and as My right hand, you will be the first to know of My coming triumph," Iuz said in a gloating tone. As he spoke, the half-dozen clerics lifted their bowed heads and stood quietly with rapt attention. They knew the cambion was about to relate something of unusual importance, for his antics were known throughout the nightmarish palace.

"My plan is nearing fruition," Iuz boomed. "Far to the south the weaklings have finally gotten enough courage to band together. They are going to battle with a host of the Stinking Brotherhood" (of course Iuz referred to the scarlet-clad servants of regimented Hell, his listeners knew) "and the two will neutralize each other." There was a soft murmur of pleasure from the listeners, for they anticipated ill for the Kingdom of Furyondy and the Archclericy of Veluna - two states who constantly sought the downfall of their master, and of themselves as well.

"Happy as that news is," Iuz purred, scratching his great belly and ignoring their minor interruption of his speaking, " I have even better word!" At this the six froze into silence and attention once again.

"Molag is in confusion! Three of the Hierarchs are missing, My spies tell Me, and there are reports of some terrible loss somewhere . . . but even this is not the best news!"

"May the plans of our Ancient Master always prevail," the entourage intoned in unison.

Beaming with malign pleasure, the great cambion raised his voice to a triumphant basso that filled the ghastly throne room. "My tools now come near. With them they bear the Second Key, that portion of the Artifact of All Evil most dear to the Dunglump Who Must Forever Sleep. Once that portion is safe in My hands, never will I allow it from My grasp. It will make Iuz more powerful. It will bend the Abyss to My will, for as long as the artifact remains separate, never will the others be able to force their wretched little plans upon Me! Upon the Abyss! Upon the only True Evil!"

"Our Lord of All Evil speaks. We hear and accept," the six said in ritual response to the utterances of the cambion.

"Listen now, for I have instructions for each of you." So saying, Iuz rapped a brazen tube beside his throne, and the horny knuckles of the demonling caused the cylinder to shudder with a mournful bell tone.

A pair of dretch swung the chamber doors apart, and a huge nabassu, wings flared, strode three paces into the room. The demon bent its knee and asked in a rasping boom, "Your wish, Eldritch Lord?"

"Fetch the ambassador of the drow here at once," Iuz said, The man-eating demon bowed, backed from the throne room, and the bronze valves were shut again by the dretch servants. Iuz smiled at his trusted lieutenants, his mouth full of pointed teeth seeming to split his face in half as he did so, then continued his instructions.

"Mole, you are assigned to work with Olive of my Lesser Six. You are to take a force of buheer and nonuz. You will command them, My regiment of Black Death, and a company of drow. You are to invade the lands of the Hierarchs, raise the wild Uroz and free reavers there, and march on Molag! I want My city back!"

A short, long-nosed mage stepped forward a pace, bowed, and replied, "I hear and obey, Ancient Lord." As he said this a pretty woman wearing the garments of a cleric of Iuz came from a curtained alcove nearby and stood one pace behind Mole, likewise making obeisance.

"Good," the cambion said as he motioned for a tall old crone, wearing a black robe covered with magical sigils, to join Mole and Olive. "Your second will be Althea, and she shall have the illusion-worker called Jumper at her beck as well. General Sindol knows My plan, and he will inform you of it. Go at once! You must begin your march immediately - do not fail!"

As the four were departing, Iuz pointed to yet another of his Greater Six. "Kermin-Mind-Bender!" A turbaned Bakluni bowed deeply. "Take the wizard, Null, and go amongst the rulers of the Bandit Kingdoms. Give them heart. Tell them I, Iuz, come to their aid. Renegade nomads and a host of others are ripe for war. Pass through the Fellreev Forest on your way. Bring them south with you. Slay the servants of the Horns. Make certain that the petty lords understand and invade the enemy after they are driven out."

"Yes, Ancient One. We will cross the Ritensa and harry the enemy all the way to Molag, or I am nothing," said the swarthy illusionist with hard arrogance in his voice.

"Exactly," said the green-eyed creature who sat on the throne above him. "Else your skull and bones will make a footstool here!" Null, a nondescript man, had joined Kermin during the course of the instruction from Iuz. Both now backed from the chamber and were gone. Half of the Greater Six remained, and Iuz now addressed them, calling in the remaining Lessers as he did so.

"Halga, My Grand Priestess, and Vayne, too, for your magic, you two shall remain here for staff duty. Radduj, Beesting - a fine pair to venture into the upper reaches of the Vesve. There you will whip the sniveling Celbits and Jebli into a frenzy of hate against men and elves. Make the forest and the northern portion of the Valley of Highfolk a charnel house. You will have assistance."

"As you command, Eldritch Lord," the two intoned in reply, then departed.

"Ormuz, arch-mage - with Patch, My High Priest, you will go to the southern portion of the Vesve and likewise incite the bands there to murder and pillage. You will have companies of My Woodsrunners and Eiger Guards. This is a most crucial part of My plan, so you two will remain until all others have gone. Then will I give you final instructions. . . ."

The huge bronze doors to the throne room were suddenly opened by the miserable slave demons, the dretch, to allow the grand entrance of Eclavdra. In addition to her entourage of dark elves, the drow noblewoman was flanked by a pair of succubi and a cadaverous cleric arrayed in the full panoply of a priest of Graz'zt. Eclavdra strode into the chamber, bowed slightly, and allowed a tiny smile to cross her lips as she addressed Iuz.

"My Lord has requested my attendance?"

Iuz was torn between laughter and fury. His demon sire had learned of Eclavdra's humiliation at the cambion's hands and had sent her guards. The strikingly lovely and totally evil drow had accepted these reinforcements as a confirmation of her own status, and again she was speaking to Iuz as an equal. What had Graz'zt promised her? Certainly queenship of all the dark elvenfolk - who could guess what else? Well, no matter. . . .

"Requested? Well, I will let that pass, for there is much cause for magnanimity," said Iuz with a mocking tone. "My plans go ahead as expected. The Hierarchs are in confusion. The fraternity of devils' curs is beset with difficulties. I send forth My hosts on all fronts, and ... it ... comes near!"

A brief look of confusion passed over the features of the beautiful drow. "All fronts, Lord Iuz?" Eclavdra asked.

"Just so. My magus, Mole, will need the assistance of your best company of fighters, dear Eclavdra, during his ... foray . . . into the lands to the southeast." Iuz paused and gave the drow noblewoman a meaningful glance. Then he added, "You and the remainder of your force here should most certainly accompany the expedition I am sending into the Vesve to bring retribution to the lowly elves and their ilk who dare to resist My will there."

"Molag?"

"A diversion, Lady - though indeed I would have My city back. . . ."

"And who goes into the lands of the Hierarchs?" the dark elf high priestess of evil inquired slowly.

Iuz seemed slightly confused and surprised by the question. "No fear as to that. Fully half of My chosen ones will bring woe to those faceless wearers of cuckoldry - four of the best to confront the Hierarchs directly, and a pair to raise allies amongst the Free Lords of the East."

"So," murmured the drow noblewoman, "that explains the great disturbance to the south - at the very gate into the realm of the Hierarchs, I am told - "

"What?" the cambion demanded. "What's that you say?!"

Eclavdra went on blithely. "And The Reaper himself was thought to have had something to do with the flux and disruption of forces arcane. . . ." She trailed off, pondering, hardly glancing at the stony-faced demi-demon sitting enthroned before her.

Suddenly Eclavdra's beautiful face worked with fury. "You foo…" She bit the word off when she saw the burning and sickly fire within Iuz's eyes, contained her anger, and smoothed her countenance and her words. "... fortunately ... ah ... seek to take advantage of the Hierarchs' weakness now, of course. So instead of going westward into the depths of Vesve's timber, I will send all of my minions - your servants, Lord Iuz - eastward with the army attacking Mo-lag." Snarling, Iuz spat, "I command otherwise!"

"Yes, Lord of Evil, but I am only a mere ambassador. I must do as my Master Graz'zt commands, even before I obey you. It is your father's wish that the drow force be sent to the area of greatest . . . threat, shall we say?"

Iuz shot from his throne, his visage a mask of terrible rage. The drow noblewoman took an involuntary step backward, closer to her attendants. This made the cambion pause and glare at them. Corpselike cleric and demonesses alike fingered the basalt symbols of Graz'zt that they wore around their necks, but all stood resolute.

The ire slowly drained from Iuz, and he spoke again. "As you point out, My father Graz'zt wishes otherwise, and he, like Me, is a sovereign in his own realm. Because he is all these things, and more, I choose to grant your request to send your force against our enemies squatting in Molag. Now begone! I have had enough of drow and their servants for today!"

The chamber was absolutely silent as Eclavdra and her train departed. As the bronze doors boomed shut behind them, Iuz surveyed his minions without expression. Each betrayed an emotion - outrage, shock, anger, unbelief. "Ahh," the cambion thought to himself with pleasure. "All save Halga suspect nothing. . . ."

Iuz waved a huge, taloned hand toward his servants and addressed them. "Come close and gain wisdom." As they advanced toward him, he continued.

"Am I not Iuz, Lord of Ancient and Eldritch Evil? Would you serve a lesser being? Why, then, do you doubt Me now? But we must take precautions, for this palace is as rife with traitors and spies as the Vesve. None do I trust, save you - and you but little! Now, cast your wards and meshes to prevent all from learning what you are about to have revealed."

There was a flurry of activity as the greater and lesser members of Iuz's chosen did as commanded. "All is secure, Lord," said Halga after a time.

Iuz nodded and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "I am much pleased with My faithful servants - you especially, and one who is coming to join you.

All my enemies have proved themselves to be fools and dupes. Mark you, all! The lickspittle slaves of the self-righteous do-gooders brawl with the lock-stepping prancers after devils' dung. Their champions chase after decoys. Hierarchs invoke their vaunted master, and that one plays the Prince of Fools!"

At this revelation, Halga dared to ask, "Lord of Pain, will you enlighten us further?"

Iuz was feeling magnanimous. "Yes, My little ones, I shall! Ormuz, you are a good left hand to Me, and Patch the thumb of it. You must reach most carefully into the Vesve and withdraw a dwarf and what he bears."

"You mean . . ." said the cleric, Patch, in awe.

"Yes," leered Iuz horribly, "and wise you were not to speak of . . . it. The dwarf is called Obmi, an old and well-used servant of Mine. Cherish him, but if a choice must be made, bring what he bears and leave him to his own recourse. Ormuz and Patch, in this you cannot fail!"

The pair bowed in acknowledgement of their charge.

"Splendid! Now, Halga, you are My right hand and Vayne its thumb, as it were. I must coordinate a great effort now. You are the ones who will assist Me in this first step toward rulership of Oerth . . . and more, too, when the time is ripe. None must be certain of My plans and motives. Will I send My forces to Vesve and the elven realm of Highfolk? We know that will be, but it is a sideshow. Molag and the Hierarchs? Of course, but as dear as is My desire to bring those sheep to skewering, it too is a distraction. The Bandit Kingdoms? Again, certainly! They are but petty allies, good for any time I choose, but let the Shield Lords and Furyondy think otherwise.

"Eclavdra and her drow? She will aid in the subterfuge; all the better unknowing! Better still, she will help to hoodwink the one who proudly names Me Son. Drow companies will bedevil the marches to the far west, and Veluna will turn that way in fear and consternation, torn between the hordes of the Scarlet Brotherhood in the Kron Hills and the threat of what might transpire in Bissel. Long is My memory, all-pervading My tentacles of action.

"And there is yet more! My dearest mother has duped those red-wrapped bundles of filth. Their war is only a distraction for her. I am well informed that she has come upon the prison of Queen Zuggtmoy, and in a short time My Lady of Fungi will join Us here in Dorakaa. With Iggwilv, she shall share My coming triumph!"

Iuz paused to allow admiring looks and murmured praise to wash over his obscene bulk. "Our Lord of Evil is all victorious!" offered one underling. "We acknowledge the everburning Evil which now lights the Empire of Iuz!" said another.

It went on like this for some minutes. Then the cambion made a small gesture, and there was silence again.

"And now, My vassals, the best of all," Iuz said softly with a leering smile. "The Hierarchs so misread what I was doing that their number brought the turd-head of death, their miserable master, to foil Me. The Reaper reaped naught but something unsatisfactory, for he and the Hierarchs who bussed his bony bum at every step are gone - vanished from the skin of Oerth. With them went an army of the Hierarchs' finest soldiers and bestial servants, a host of great strength.

"Where? Well might you wonder. They are all slain, these lesser ones. They fertilize the good weeds and feed the distended bellies of the scavengers for a hundred miles.

"There is no power of good, not one, nor any being of any menace to us there," Iuz said reassuringly as he saw the concerned expressions on the faces of his loyal henchmen. "Of that I am most certain, so let your minds be at rest." He said this without allowing any hint of his lack of other knowledge to color his reassurance. Iuz was annoyed at being unable to determine exactly what had happened, but the opportunity was there nonetheless, and he had seized it with an iron grip.

"The Horned Society is sorely wounded, and We shall deliver the coup de grace to them as a by-stroke of Our grander scheme. No interference from Hades will be forthcoming."

The four departed thereafter, and Iuz sat in his chair envisioning his empire to come.

Chapter 18

"Droll."

"Droll?"

"As amusing as a kitten," affirmed the Master Cat.

At that, Cord's companions burst into laughter, for his expression was pained at the indignity of the analogy. At the sound of his friends' hilarity, the young adventurer assumed a haughty expression and turned away, ostensibly to admire the pair of massive spotted lions that purred beside the padded armchair in which the Catlord sat.

Gellor came to Gord's rescue. "Then it was not you who brought us here?"

"Hardly, bard. It is as much a mystery to me as it is to you. Make the best of it - as I am doing. You'll manage," their host drawled. This brought more, if somewhat uneasy, laughter from the others. "Contemplating the course of events, I might hazard an opinion," the velvet-garbed fellow added.

"We would be grateful for your counsel, sir," Gellor said in a way which indicated that master was not being asked to instruct pupil.

"As you wish," said the Master Cat with a knowing smile. "Gord simply botched the spell. He mispronounced the key sounds, as it were, reversing them. His inclusion of me, the incantation of my name, wrought the final stage of the dweomer. Instead of whisking Nerull and his bestial steed off to Hades, young Gord here managed to bring you ail with him here - to my secret domain! Most droll! You related that your comrade . . . Incosee? . . . had been made panicksome by the aura of these daemonkin. He was beyond the power of the spell. As to the other . . . Lizard, I believe you named him . . . well, the dead are not subject to such magic."

Gord flushed in embarrassment. "I meant to call certain powers to our aid. How could I manage to get it so wrong?"

"Better you here than me there!" their host said fervently. "I have no desire to stand face to face with The Reaper - at least not without great preparation and strong allies! How you managed to bring all here is a conundrum, for this place is hid betwixt and between the Ethereal, Astral, and Prime Material Planes. There is that of the cat in you for certain, Gord. Do not, I pray, become apprentice to a spell-binder, though - else who knows what havoc you will wreak with the recondite arts!"

As the group relaxed in chuckling and banter, the Master Cat looked at them with a not unfriendly gaze. Furred humanoids with feline features and

tails appeared. They served the adventurers fermented mare's milk and an assortment of snacks - slivers of fowl, balls of ground raw meat, pickled fish, smoked shellfish. The adventurers ate the food and drank the kumiss with obvious pleasure.

The Catlord arose but insisted that they continue their meal. "There are matters I must attend to, but I request that you remain and enjoy yourselves as my guests. Such stuff as bread, vegetables, and fruits will come later - it is provender of the sort unusual to this place. When you have had your fill, simply sound this silver bell here. My servants will come and see to your needs. Rooms are prepared for each of you, and there will be those things you require to be clean and comfortable as well. Enjoy yourselves until I return," he said and simply vanished as he stepped through a nearby doorway.

Melf pulled a long face at the style of the departure. "That is no great trick."

"True, Master," said the halfling Biff, "for I have seen you do it thanks to that - "

"Enough!" commanded the elven adventurer crossly. "You will bore these good folk with your silly banter." Gord and Chert had embraced heartily, pounding each other on the back and giving vent to cries of joy and welcome, when they found themselves together in their initial place of entry - a park and garden surrounded by a circular building of stone and logs and other stuff that seemed to spring from the earth and blend into the greenery that in turn surrounded and sheltered it.

They had fallen from a gray limbo, a gut-wrenching nothingness that made their teeth ache and their nerves tingle, into an idyllic verdure before the feet of a huge statue of a sabre-toothed tiger hewn from ochre-toned feldspar. As if in answer to Cord's wild thoughts of reassuring surroundings, the homely face of a gangling barbarian popped into view. The tangle of curly brown hair and the winsome grin could belong to only one individual in all the multiverse. "Chert!" exclaimed Gord. "What on Oerth?!"

Then the salutations and introductions had begun - only to be rudely interrupted by the appearance of a half-score of snarly-visaged jaguars (as these felines were called, they later learned) that surrounded them and kept them on edge until the sudden appearance of their master, the Catlord. Gord, previously acquainted with this august personage, was immediately recognized by this worthy, and the master called off the huge cats.

Gord, with the help of the others, explained the circumstances surrounding their sudden intrusion into the sanctum sanctorum of their startled host. At this same time, Melf, a wizard and fighter of no small skill, and his lieutenant, Biff, a clever little halfling skilled in swordsmanship as well as thievery, made the acquaintance of Gellor, Curley Greenleaf, and the redoubtable Gord of Greyhawk, a person oft mentioned by Chert during his sojourn with Melf and Biff.

Chert, already an old acquaintance of both bard and druid, needed no introduction. In fact, both Gellor and the half-elven druid-ranger had been regaled with many accounts of the adventures of Gord and his hulking companion, so both were well aware of the comradery that existed between the two young adventurers.

"Lizard is not here," Melf said in consternation.

"I saw him fall, gashed terribly by the monster who served The Reaper," the halfling had volunteered in reply.

"What of Incosee?" Gord had said, looking inquiringly from the one-eyed bard to the rotund druid.

"Fled in spell-induced panic," recalled the bald half-elf, shaking his head sadly, "when last I saw him."

"Six of us then," said Chert slowly. "Three of us, and three of you, Gord," he explained, meaning that his friend's group equalled theirs. "This amounts to a most unwholesome number. Still, I think it bodes well, not ill, for us all!"

Then had the Master Cat brought them into his abode and seen to their needs. Now they were well fed, tired, and had naught but comfort and a good night's rest before them. Without further ado, the half-dozen newly met adventurers went to their own chambers to sleep the sleep of the justly fatigued.

Sometime later - hours? days? The time was uncertain here - Gord awakened, completely refreshed and feeling ready for anything. A feline person of indeterminate gender was standing beside the soft couch upon which he had slept for . . . how long? Who could tell in such a timeless place as this?

"Greetings, man called Gord," the cat-creature said, showing a mouthful of sharp fangs as it smiled. "There is a pool which hairless ones such as you and your friends will enjoy bathing in. Thereafter, a repast awaits you in the

Court of Dappled Sunlight and Pleasant Stretching. Please follow me, and I will show you the way."

Gord complied happily, not even bothering to slip on the loose linen garment tossed across the foot of his downy bed. There was obviously no need, for the temperature was mild, and he was content to go as nature made him.

Arriving at the deep pool, he found everyone but Curley and the mage, Melf, there before him. Chert was frolicking at a game of tag with the tiny halfling, while Gellor and a striking woman with tawny hair lay basking, totally nude in the warm sunlight. Gord was suddenly self-conscious and leaped into the waters to hide his nakedness. Both the bard and the woman laughed at his discomfort, and eventually he came out of the pool.

"No need for such concern," the lovely female said to him in a wonderfully throaty voice. "Save for you and your friends here, we are all cats of one sort or another. None of us cares a whisker for the conventions you humans choose to affect."

"This is most amazing to me, my lady," the young thief replied, truly surprised. "Surely you are no feline at all, for unless my eyes deceive me, you are one of the most lovely women I have ever had the pleasure of seeing!"

The amber-haired woman laughed at this. "Thank you, man, for your sincere praise. Be aware, however, that I am called Tirrip, and I am what your sort call a tiger-were."

Rather than drawing back in fear and revulsion, Gord laughed in return. "This amply shows, fair . . . feline, how ignorant I am. I crave your pardon."

"Well spoken. You have both my pardon and, I hope, my friendship, if you can accept such from a creature such as I."

Thereafter the two fell into an animated conversation, from which Gellor quietly excused himself. The arrival of Green-leaf and Melf, chatting contentedly as if they were long-lost kinsmen, signaled an end to the relaxed sunning. After a brief wetting, both called for a conclave over a repast, so the whole party trooped off to the appointed area for their meal, the Court of Dappled Sunlight and Pleasant Stretching.

They were attended by the humanoid catfolk but were otherwise alone. Tirrip had left to join others of her kind somewhere else - whether in the great, circular mansion or the countryside beyond, Gord was uncertain. After they had broken their fast, Greenleaf spoke to the others.

"Melf and I have been in conversation regarding the whole matter of our mission - and his own quest as well." The druid looked at Melf, and the fighter-mage nodded his head for the half-elven druid to continue. "To be brief, he and I both have urgent need to be elsewhere. At the risk of offending our host, I wish to take advantage of Melfs kind offer to transport me with him when he departs."

Melf cleared his throat, and when everyone looked his way, the gray elf smiled and said, "I will refrain from departing, of course, if you feel that it will jeopardize those who remain here. There is the matter of the item we all seek, however. . . . Gord, what is your opinion?"

Gord shrugged. "My acquaintance with our host is just that, and I cannot hazard a guess. Still, our purpose seems unchanged, and duty demands that we continue with our mission as quickly as possible. I, for one, have no objection to the three of you leaving. I will take my chances."

"I'm not afraid of the consequences," Chert boomed. "Go on!"

"It will be just you two, and Lord Gellor, who stay behind," the warrior-wizard said. "Biff is going with us, for he must oversee my affairs in my absence and attend to his own further training as well."

Greenleaf nodded, adding, "As Melf must report to his liege, Mordenkainen, I too must inform superiors of events. It goes against my grain to leave you, but I must do so now. Let us say our farewells now. Gellor, Chert, Gord - friends and comrades all - be blessed! I'll leave word in Chendl, at the Royal Palace itself, as to my whereabouts. Until we meet again," the druid finished, embracing each of his friends warmly.

"You grow old and soft," Gellor said with a chuckle as he noted the tears in the druid's eyes. "This is not a permanent thing, merely an answer to a call of duty. All soldiers must do thus."

Gord found Melf standing beside him, hand extended. The halfling was there likewise. "I thank you, as does Biff, for our lives," he said, gripping the young thief hand. "Here is a token of my everlasting esteem, a small scroll of spells to replace the one you used. May you use them to their direct purpose!"

Everyone laughed at that, and, tension broken, the six said their final goodbyes and it was done. Melf, Greenleaf, and the halfling went off to the gray elfs chamber. They would leave from there, unseen. The three remaining men decided to move about the place and make themselves evident, attracting attention just in case.

They toured the huge mansion and strolled the gardens and parks in and around the place for the next two hours. All was quiet, and nothing untoward occurred. They gave wide berth to the numerous great cats, which were everywhere. Here a leopard lay on a tree limb, there a pair of cheetahs seemed to be racing for sheer sport. Lions, panthers, tigers, jaguars, pumas, smilodons with their sabre-teeth, and all the sorts of smaller felines as well, from bobcats to jaguarundi to domestic varieties. None so much as sniffed at them. It was as if the men were invisible.

"Come, Gord! Your friends too!" Tirrip called as they passed a green. She was with a handful of men and women - males and females, actually - who all appeared to be her brothers or sisters. "We are practicing our skills with human weapons and having all sorts of sport," the tiger-were called to them. "Come join us!"

The three men strolled over, and the others of Tirrip's kind greeted them in cool but polite fashion. There were two males and four other females all clad, as Tirrip was, in belted tunics of thick cotton. After introductions, the others returned to their contests - fencing, wrestling, jumping, and whatever else seemed to please them. One large male had defeated all his fellows at wrestling. Chert could not resist.

"I will try my skill against you," he said, stepping into the area of flattened grass and removing his jack and blouse as he did so. The tiger-were male was nearly as tall as the giant barbarian, and his whole body was a mass of corded, rippling muscles.

"Ha!" the fellow laughed, dropping into a crouch. "This will be a good lesson for you," he added - and then he sprang.

All the rest watched with fascination. Fast as the tiger-in-man-form was, Chert was ready. The huge hillman caught the tiger-were in a hold, heaved, and the surprised creature sailed through the air. Chert spun to observe his opponent's fall, but there was no thud and whoosh of breath from the force of the throw. The fellow landed on his feet, snarling!

"Come on, Raug! Show him!" shouted one of the females in totally human fashion. The tiger-were needed no encouragement, however, for he was now circling and ready to spring again.

The contest went on for some time without either combatant able to gain an advantage. Both Chert and Raug seemed to grow more angry and determined to break the impasse. From springing and circling the two went to grips, and after much twisting, breaking of holds, and straining, the

massive barbarian finally managed to get his opponent in a vise from which Raug could not escape, nor break in any fashion. "Yield!" Chert demanded, applying leverage and squeezing with all his force.

"Beware, Chert!" Gord called suddenly. "He takes tiger form!"

Chert instantly loosed his hold and was on his feet, reaching for a nonexistent weapon - the axe, Brool, which was usually at his broad leathern girdle. Meanwhile, the enraged Raug was completing his transformation. From a two-hundred-fifty-pound man he had changed to a tiger of twice that weight, and there was murder in the great cat's baleful eyes. The other tiger-weres were hissing - whether in encouragement or some other emotion, Gord knew not. Without hesitation, the young thief snatched up Chert's mighty axe and sent it spinning toward his friend in one smooth motion.

"Chert!"

The barbarian caught the weapon without taking his eyes off the tiger, standing poised to bring the great blade arcing to meet any attack. Neither antagonist moved. Suddenly, Tirrip was between them.

"Stop this! Slaughter is not permitted by our Master - you know that, Raug. Shame! And you!" she spat at Chert. "As a guest, how dare you bare a weapon in such manner!"

Raug was growling curses but returning to man form. The barbarian was sheepishly lowering his weapon.

"Stupid cubs! Little boys! That's what you are," the angry female said, looking disdainfully from one to the other. "You, Raug, were arrogant and couldn't accept an honest defeat at the hands of a mere human, so you resorted to foul play."

Raug, now again appearing as a man, flushed and looked away, but there was no escape, for the others were still hissing at him, and the sound was clearly one of disapproval. Raug slunk out of the ring. Tirrip turned to Chert again.

"Would you kill another over a wrestling match? All were on your side, and simply stepping back would have sufficed to end the confrontation. No! You had to show your manliness and bravery, didn't you? Well, think on the result had you used that weapon - and be glad I stopped your stupidity."

Now it was Chert's turn to look elsewhere. He shuffled from the beaten circle and tossed Brool casually to rest on the grass again, pretending nothing had happened. "You two," Tirrip said flatly, "will shake hands and

apologize to each other. You are going to behave properly and not spoil things for the rest of us. Do it now!"

Slowly the two brawny males approached. Then, grinning, they shook hands and began apologizing to each other, sharing the comradeship of males who had been scolded and bullied by a female, a feeling that cut across species to unite them, and the group relaxed and returned to easy mingling. In fact, the whole affair brought them together in better understanding, and soon the three humans and seven tiger-weres were engaged in all manner of tests to see who could out-excel the other.

After winning at every contest save racing, Gord began to be ostracized by the tigerfolk, and even his friends watched most strangely as he performed. He beat all at swordplay, moving with a speed none of the others could duplicate. He jumped higher and farther than all the others. Tirrip barely outdistanced him running. None could get a grip on him in wrestling. Although he could not throw Raug, Chert, or the other male, Yeeor, he managed to defeat them in wrestling through agility and what seemed like trickery to his opponents. Gellor, who had not engaged in the various trials, spoke up.

"It is time to see if you can best me, Gord. The others are not really skilled swordsmen - Chert's weapon is the axe. Will you use long or short blade?"

Grinning and feeling confident, Gord eyed the practice swords that were displayed near his comrade. He selected a small blade not too dissimilar from his own shortsword, hefted it, found its balance satisfactory, and stood on guard. "Ready," he said, his eyes locked on Gellor.

"And I," replied the bard, slowly bringing a longsword up.

A rapid exchange of attacks took place. The feints and parries amazed the onlookers, for such swordplay was rare. The typical mode was to slash, chop, and cut with only an occasional and often fortuitous thrust or parry. Gellor had the longer blade, and he was very fast and clever. Gord's shortsword was quicker in response, however, held as it was by the young thief. In addition, Gord was so agile and fast on his feet that there was much fencing before either opponent managed to touch the other The match would go to whoever managed to hit the other five times. Gellor finally won with a score of five to four.

"That was well done," said Gord as he clapped his comrade on the back. His breathing was easy, and only a light sheen of perspiration showed that

the young adventurer had been exerting himself.

Gellor drew a deep breath. "For one supposedly skilled in arts other than weapon play, you show remarkable ability. You seem far better than the last time I saw you ply your blade," the bard said almost ruefully as he mopped sweat from his brow with a linen square.

"You'd have slain me easily enough were the contest actual," Gord replied, passing the whole matter off. "Let's wash the grime from these trials from ourselves and find something to eat. I'm famished!"

That suggestion met with general approval, and everyone went off to refresh themselves. Gord, Chert, and Gellor found their clothing clean and ready for wear, it having been seen to by the servants while they had been at sport. They had a surprisingly fine meal in a small, flower-filled atrium. Chert managed to clear every dish of its contents before finally admitting surfeit. Eventually each went off to his own apartment to doze.

"Up, lazybones!" It was Tirrip, looking lovely in a flowering gown of deep green piqued out with golden piping. "There is a sing about to be held, and you must come."

Gord followed and was soon in a high-raftered hall that was filled with felines. Tirrip's friends were there in human form, and there were a number of other people. The young thief wasn't certain about the true form of any of them, but they seemed friendly enough when he was introduced - Gellor and Chert were there ahead of him and already in conversation - Chert with his new comrade Raug and a pair of women unknown to Gord, while Gellor spoke with several others including a white-haired man with pale skin and colorless eyes.

"...Lord Lowen the seneschal; Lowen, this is Master Gord," Tirrip concluded the introduction.

"My pleasure, Gord, and do dispense with the formalities; call me Lowen, please." When the young thief inclined his head in acknowledgement, the seneschal went on. "Your associate here, Gellor, has told me a little of your adventures and how you came here, and I am eager to hear more. Our liege was in too big a hurry to be elsewhere to give me much information about the unexpected arrival of guests such as yourselves."

Gord gave a brief and lucid account of their adventure, omitting all details that pertained to the Second Key of the Artifact of All Evil. He was interrupted often, though, by the quick-witted seneschal, who asked pointed

questions required to explain some detail or other. Gellor helped him to manage the virtual interrogation, disguised as it was by polite conversational tone. Lowen seemed altogether too sharp not to detect the gaps in the whole, but he did not ask direct questions about the reason for the party to be where they were, seeming to accept the vague references to political and military matters as sufficient.

" Now that is a lovely ring!" Lowen exclaimed as Gord was describing an encounter with gestures.

"What? Oh, this chrysoberyl? It is nothing," Gord said with seeming modesty as he lowered his left arm to remove the ring from sight.

"Nothing? It is hardly a trantle!" the seneschal said. "A cat's-eye stone is most prized here, of course," he laughed. "That one has an aura of power about it which is unmistakable to such as myself. . . . May I ask how you came by it?"

There was no polite way to avoid this direct inquiry, so Gord simply told Lowen the truth; he'd taken it from a dead thief when he was but a lad. He also added that he was not aware of any special dweomer borne by the ring. The seneschal seemed satisfied, and the matter was dropped. Just then the sing began.

What followed seemed to Gord to be the worst attempt at music he had ever heard. There was endless screeching and yowling, accompanied by basso growls and falsetto howls. It was, in fact, a massed caterwauling performed by feline and were-feline throats from housecat to tiger-were. The cathedral-ceilinged hall was filled with creatures who seemed to find this wonderful, but the three humans came near to clapping their hands over their ears and fleeing. After a time, though, the general chorus broke up, groups going here and there to continue the festivity in discrete company, more or less.

"Let's walk in the garden," Tirrip suggested.

Gord found that a fine idea, despite the occasional clumps of yowling "singers" that were there. Eventually even these serenades were ceased, and the remainder of the night was pleasant indeed.

Chapter 19

Three days later their host returned from whatever business he had been about. The Catlord said nothing about his affairs, and the three men who were his guests dared not make impolite inquiry. They had been well cared for and comfortable. The enforced inactivity galled them, however, and all were itching to be back on the trail of the artifact they sought so desperately. Gellor broached the matter of their return, and the Master Cat said that the matter would be accomplished to their satisfaction in due course.

"Prepare your gear," he told them, "and be ready for departure soon. Please be so kind as to see to Gord's things too, for I would speak to him for a bit before you take your leave."

Puzzled, Gord watched Chert and the one-eyed bard depart for their quarters. What could the Catlord wish to talk to him about? Granted, they had met once before, but that matter had been satisfactorily settled to both his and Gord's evident benefit. This matter was of another sort, and only the Master Cat knew, but Gord would soon learn of it, he reflected.

"Your thoughts are plain, Gord." The comment startled the young adventurer from his pondering, but the dark-haired man spoke on, ignoring this. "Don't be surprised at such stuff as that. You wonder what I am at, and I'll be blunt and plain. Your mission is known to me, and I approve. No active part will I take, but I will give you some information that may assist you in your coming adventures."

"You are aware of the Second Key?"

"Yes, as well as the First and the Third - and what they will do if ever joined," the Catlord said somberly. "It is now time for me to tell you about that ring you have worn for some years. You asked once, and I spoke not, for it is one that I myself made long ago. There are eight others like it, but that is something altogether different. Are you now aware of any of its benefits?"

Gord nodded slowly. "I think it enabled me to see clearly through intervening clouds, with vision unnaturally sharp and close . . . but that is all."

"The dweomer of the ring includes such vision, and the seeing of light not normal for the human eye as well. Even the sharpest-eyed cat sees not as clearly as you when you employ the power of that ring. That is but a minor benison which it conveys. It has a principal power. It saves your life,

but only if you are attuned to it. You are, somehow, and this is most surprising to me. It was not meant for humans."

"Not meant for humans?" Gord repeated stupidly, unable to comprehend this.

"Nevertheless, it worked. That, Gord, is how you managed to twist that banishment spell as you did. The casting would never have affected one so powerful and well-shielded as The Reaper when he ventures upon the Prime Material Plane. The ring expended a portion of its dweomer and brought you and your friends here. Now there are eight usages remaining, for all know a cat has nine lives."

At that Gord had to grin. The Catlord was likewise smiling. "It will save me eight more times?"

"That it will . . . probably. There are always situations in which its dweomer can be negated, so do not become overconfident," the Catlord warned.

"That I will remember," said Gord with feeling.

"Do. The ring has certain other powers you should be aware of, for they do not operate properly without knowledge - sometimes only with concentration, as with the vision power. Those who are, or would prove to be, ill-disposed toward you, are seen in sinister light, thus alerting you of their malign nature. Similarly, should you think on it, most devices and traps will be discernible, so you will notice the covering of a concealed pit, some fell trap loaded with poison or blades, or see in glowing outline magical guards to snare the unwary."

"That I have seen in Rigello's stronghold. Had I but known, the prize might have been mine. . . ." Gord's voice trailed off as he looked accusingly at the Master Cat. "You cheated!"

"Unjustly accused," smiled the Catlord contentedly. "How could I know what understanding you had of the ring? Besides, never was there an obligation to explain such to you. I do so now out of my kindness and a desire to defeat those who would bring ruin to all."

Gord could not but agree with that. "True. I do thank you for this intelligence - and for your hospitality during our stay. Please convey my fond farewell to Lady Tirrip and all the others."

"You are welcome, but not so fast. There is yet a little more. Anxious as you and your companions are, this hiatus will be beneficial, I think," said the Catlord in a serious tone. He poured Gord and himself a pale, greenish

wine, handed the young adventurer one of the crystal goblets, and then went on.

"You are thief, acrobat, swordsman, and more. Have you ever considered how it is that you are able to have such skills, to gain and improve them so readily? I have. Your performance in the small contests here must have been spectacular, for I have heard repeatedly about it. Lowen, my trusted seneschal, actually thinks you might be dangerous . . . no matter! The ring you wear conveys surefootedness, agility, the catlike property of landing on your feet, and magical ability to climb as a cat does as well. Test this, and you will quickly learn - you must already unconsciously draw upon some of the power of the gem."

"You say you had this ring created," interjected Gord. "You tell me of its great power. Why not also explain the reason for making such rings as this and its eight mates?"

The Catlord stared at Gord, assessing him carefully. He saw nothing save honest desire for knowledge and a keen mind trying to discover what lay behind the matter. The Master Cat spoke. "Each of the nine is similar, yet subtly differs from the others. If you are truly attuned to the ring you wear, its dweomer will enable you to transform yourself into a cat of midnight coat, tomcat or great leopard, as you desire. Fitting, isn't it, for one who styles himself as you do at times?"

At this Gord chuckled wryly. "Yes, I am astounded and pleased at all this. More and more wondrous it grows, but still I am at a loss to understand the reason for the existence of these nine magic circlets."

"Each was made as a token and favor for ... certain humans, let us say. The nine were bestowed as gifts. Of the other eight I know, just as I now know the whereabouts and owner of this one. I was surprised to learn how you had acquired it, for I had supposed another manner altogether. You told true when you related to Lowen the means by which you gained it. ... There are unanswered questions for us all, it would seem. Now, let us join your friends, for it is the hour of leave-taking!"

The Catlord accompanied Gord to the upper floor where Chert and Gellor waited. All was in readiness, so they went immediately to a secluded chamber in the Master Cat's own portion of the ring-shaped villa. The room was filled with strange and bizarre trappings and equipment, but Gord had no chance to examine any of it.

"Over there," the Catlord said, pointing to a place on the floor. "See the nine-pointed star between the gold sun and silver moon. There is ample room for all of you to stand within its confines. Lord Melf left us by means provided by one who favors him, but I have only this more prosaic device for magical conveyance. I have attuned it to the castle of the archmage Tenser - do you know him?"

The three adventurers replied in the negative, although Gellor stated that he had heard of him by reputation.

"Tenser is a kindred spirit and allied to me. He is aware of your imminent arrival, so there will be no unpleasant surprises when you appear there."

"Where is the castle of this Tenser located?" asked Gellor.

"In the Cairn Hills near the shores of Nyr Dyv. Tenser will have information for you, I am sure, as he keeps careful track of events of the nature you are concerned with. You should trust him, and do not hesitate to seek his assistance in your quest. He is likely to aid you in some fashion."

"That is welcome news," Gellor said with relief. "It is most likely that we will need to be far to the north of where you send us. If he will but speed us to Chendl, or some similar locale, we will be most in his debt."

At that the Catlord shrugged. "Who can say? Tenser is his own man, but he is fair and just and hates the forces of Evil. Until we meet again!" he said briskly, and rapped the floor with an ebony rod he had gotten from somewhere. There was a rainbow flash, and they were gone.

The gray nothingness, without any of the unpleasant sensations that had previously accompanied their transference to the domain of the Catlord, washed over them for an instant. Then they were within a sunny, round chamber standing within the outlines of a series of circles and cabalistic diagrams set into the stone floor in strips of various sons of metal and other substances. The room was unoccupied except for themselves.

"I smell the scent of the lake," Gord said as he stepped out of the magical diagram and went to gaze out one of the windows that pierced the circumference of the chamber - one facing each of the cardinal compass points, if the sun was any indication.

"You refer to the Nyr Dyv, of course," drawled the one-eyed bard as he and Chert joined their companion and all of them gazed at the panorama revealed by the window. "There are other great bodies of water besides that one, you know."

"I am provincial - not a world traveler such as you, Gellor," Gord said as he inhaled deeply. "Of those other so-called lakes I know nothing. Besides, the smell of the Nyr Dyv is unique - like perfume!"

"More like seaweed and fish," the big barbarian said as he sniffed at the breeze wafting in off the sparkling sheet of blue water, which stretched northward as far as the eye could see.

The three men made a circuit of the chamber, peering from each window in turn. They were at the top of the tallest tower of the castle - Tenser's castle, evidently, although that worthy had not made an appearance yet. The shore of the lake ran gently northeastward from the place the stronghold was built, and Gord hazarded a guess that they were somewhere along the lake's large Midbay, in territory claimed by neither Greyhawk nor Urnst. The cliff-lined shore, rocky verge, and sheer hills of the region made it unpopular with sailors and the bargefolk alike. It was a fine place for someone who didn't care for unexpected company.

The castle itself seemed to have grown from the rocky spire of an ancient mountain worn to a nub by time and the elements. There were similar tors roundabout, but this one thrust up in a place where its neighbors were distant. In fact, the prominence stood in a valley - small and ridged, but a valley nonetheless. A creek ran down the southern slope of the ridge at the lower part of the U-shaped vale, passed along the western side of the fortress, and sped in its deep-cut channel to fall into the lake beyond. Steep-sided cliffs and streambed made the castle nearly unassailable by usual methods. Gord supposed that there were many protections against magical attack as well.

The place rambled along the natural contours of the rock. Far below was a wall that surrounded the place. Where it was pierced for entry were barbican, drawbridge, gatehouse, and portcullis. Turrets and bartizans stuck here and there at the angles were proof against any portion of the machicolated battlements having attackers ascend unmolested. A grassy strip of varying breadth grew between this wall and the rest of the works, although there was a separate bailey from the gate to the place where the rock had been hewn to allow entry into the central spire. Along the paved road were squat stone buildings that formed a parallel set of walls to confine those entering the gate to a narrow way.

From the spire rose the roof of a great hall and several lesser constructions, tied by walks and bridges of stone blocks, crenellated and

showing pierced merlons for archery. The ancient rock of the mountain had been hardest where the great tower rose. About half of its seventy-foot height was of this core, shaped but little by tools, but embrasured between natural buttresses of living stone.

"A hard place to assault," Gellor murmured, "and Fli wager that there are rooves and shutters of metal to place when this place is besieged!"

"I prefer the open," Chert said in reply, "to being bottled up in some little place such as this."

Laughing at the truth of that, Gellor and Gord began searching for some means of egress. The barbarian joined them gladly. They could find neither stair nor trapdoor. They were prisoners, it seemed!

"Where is this Tenser?" said Chert angrily. "Mage or no, I have words for one who provides no means of leaving his 'hospitality.' "

Suddenly the floor in the center of the chamber became as transparent as water. Only a faint reflection revealed that something other than air occupied the space where great slabs of polished gneiss had formerly been seen. Then a strange, metallic voice rang out.

"Welcome to my castle! I just discovered that you were already here, and I regret not greeting you sooner. If you will step onto the transparent section of floor, you will be with me shortly."

Gord took the opportunity to test the powers he had just learned his chrysoberyl ring possessed. Neither of his friends seemed eager to comply with the request, eyeing the dear floor suspiciously.

"Come ahead," the young thief said confidently as he stepped directly into the middle of the glasslike floor. "It is as solid as stone!" He did not articulate that he had seen no trick or trap in the area when he gazed carefully at it and thought hard as the Catlord had instructed.

Gellor strode readily enough to stand beside Gord even as he spoke about the firmness that his presence demonstrated. Chert was still nervous, and he moved his bulk gingerly, tiptoeing to take a position with the other two. Immediately upon his so doing, the floor yielded to their weight, and they sank only slightly more slowly than they would have in water.

"Hopping hells!" the barbarian yelled, trying vainly to grab the edge of the floor as he sank past it. Gellor and Gord too made clutching motions, but some force prevented them from grasping the edge of the solid floor they could clearly see.

They sank through the floor of the next level of the tower as well - some sort of laboratory, workroom, and library, from what little they could observe during the brief course of their passage. Again they futilely attempted to hold on. As they sank yet further, however, their rate of descent slowed dramatically, and at the last they floated so softly that their feet barely felt a jolt when they came to rest on a thick rug that was but one of many rich carpets covering the chamber's floor.

"Most pleased to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," said a man of medium height and quick gestures. "I am Tenser, of course, and you must be ... Gellor . . . Chert . . . and this is Gord!" As he spoke each name he inclined his head curtly and smiled. "Please be seated," he went on, waving toward several chairs and a divan. This room was evidently his personal living quarters. There was a curtained bed, a small dining table, and other objects that showed the room to be a frequently used and well-loved domicile.

"Sir Tenser, despite the startling nature of our arrival, we are most happy to be here!" Gellor said in a stately tone. "It almost seemed we were imprisoned for a time when we were above. . . ."

"Yes, I understand. However, such construction keeps unwanted snoopers out - and sometimes it keeps other sorts of things in, too, if you get my point."

Gord, imagining what sort of creatures magic-users often summoned with their spells, agreed heartily that the lack of means to pass freely from floor to floor of the massive tower was a splendid one indeed.

Tenser seated himself in an oddly carved chair with a high wooden back and a padded seat. The thing seemed very old, for the sheen of its wood was blue, the mark of ancient sable-wood. The archmage was clad in garments the shade of a robin's egg, with a sash of deep ultramarine and boots to match. Much of the room was also decorated in blue - rugs, arras, and various and sundry decorative pieces. All shades and admixtures of azure were evident. Small wonder, then, that Tenser chose to build his keep on the shores of the bright, blue Lake of Unknown Depths. The man himself, however, had both brown hair and eyes, Gord noted. He was not remarkable until one observed him closely.

Of medium height and build, the archmage seemed ordinary at first. His features were regular, although the nose was distinctive. One look at Tenser's large and penetrating eyes was sufficient to alert the discerning

person that this was an exceptional character. His hands were large and long-fingered, and they moved with deceptive rapidity and grace. Gord felt that there was far more to the man than met the eye, and then realized that this was probably done by Tenser on purpose. Unprepossessing and mild - sure ways to put all off guard. No matter now, however, for the archmage was at worst a friendly neutral.

"When Catlord told me of the cause for the great disturbance in the energy flux, I began investigation immediately," Tenser said. "There is but little I have managed to glean. Powers contest with each other in the enemy camp. Each masks the action and purpose from the other. The enmity bodes well for all those of a disposition which resists the ascendancy of Evil. Still, the struggle might bring woe to us, for the use of magic to find something - information, an object, whatever - is now virtually impossible."

Gellor asked the archmage exactly what he was driving at. Tenser, it seemed, tended toward the pedantic, for he went into a lengthy exposition.

"All spells draw upon one form of energy or another. Little ones use small energy, big ones can draw tremendous currents. Those castings that utilize the power of some deity or another, those channeled through the medium of a being of power, are of one sort; and the aura of such is distinct. Likewise, work of dweomercrafting leaves a unique signature, as it were. Oh, not the minor ones - little spells are much the same as a rune or two written in the sand. But the major works leave a long and identifiable trace, at least for a time."

"Well and good, archmage. I understand this, for I am able to work a few minor spells myself," the one-eyed bard reminded Tenser.

"Just so. Your energy comes from a fixed point, as does all. Each focal point is different, distinct, and detectable. It is possible for those of great power to cloak theirs - however, I cannot. This place is built on a nexus, for I desired to have that advantage. Think on this: Of all probable worlds of this sort, Oerth is most magical. There are fewer constraints on dweomercrafting and other spell-working here than on other planes of probability. But that is a two-edged sword, so to speak.

"Imagine a map which glows with differing patterns and hues. It is a chart of energy points and flux lines on Oerth and the nearby planes. It is hard to read, for both knowledge and patience are required. Furthermore, only certain ones with talent or power can even perceive it. When force is employed, the map's colors brighten, the lines change, the patterns shift -

slight or otherwise, for an instant or longer, as I have already spoken of. Certain ones can observe these changes. Beings are now observing - and interfering, too. I can observe, but I am too insignificant to alter patterns - other than my own, of course, by use of energy. Small usage I can mask, but there are those who can hide far more.

"All the greater patterns and fluxes of Oerth are being scrutinized. At the same time, those of beings elsewhere are being screened, altered, concealed. While this indicates still greater events than even those which have recently occurred, it also means I am unable to draw upon any major energy without attracting attention and possibly retaliation of unwanted or overwhelming sort.

"Perhaps I will have a part in the resolution of things. Perhaps not. Any action now would be premature, so I wait and gather my strength for the appropriate time. This boils down to the fact that I cannot send you to where you wish to go by means of magic," Tenser concluded with a solemnity that was as anticlimactic as his statement.

This evoked an immediate response from Gord, who was less interested in the technicalities of magic than Gellor was, and not totally uninterested and uncomprehending as Chert was. "Where should we be?"

"There is a helix over Chendl."

"That is where we planned to go," said Gord.

"Perhaps the display is deceiving," the archmage countered.

"If so?"

"You must make a choice. Before the whole display became too dangerous and difficult for me to read, I believe I detected a curious flux pattern."

"Please explain this to us, archmage," the one-eyed bard asked with renewed interest. "Perhaps we can discern our course from what you observed."

Tenser drew himself up, puffed out his cheeks, and nodded. "Who can know? Still, perhaps it will mean something to you. For a brief time a Y-shaped pattern seemed to flow. It ran from the Kron Hills area straight toward Chendl. One arm stretched over the Vesve Forest and the Valley of Highfolk. The second was unstable, but arced toward the eastern shores of Whyestil Lake, vibrating as does a lute string when plucked. It all lasted but briefly, and then the spiraling helix replaced it as powers fought to cloak their designs."

At this point Tenser rose and left the chamber. The three adventurers began an animated discussion of what their course should be. The southern area was easily assessed and could be discarded as a possibility. They knew what was happening there, and that the elves of Celene and their allies must deal with it as best they could. Certainly the Second Key traveled along one of the two arms of the Y-shaped force. But which arm? The one vibrating between Dorakaa and Molag showed the great tension between the foul Iuz and the Hierarchs. Summoning of their deity indicated the Hierarchs thought the thing they sought to be near their southern border. But the flux showed that Iuz might know otherwise. There was also the question of relative power. How was it that the cambion, fell and terrible as Iuz was, could resist such as Nerull? Demonaic assistance was the only reasonable conclusion.

The left branch of the Y was a less certain clue. There might be interplay with the archmagi of Highfolk leagued with Mordenkainen and his circle of wizards, with a countering pull again emanating from Dorakaa. But why? What was transpiring along such a line?

"The thing Melf sought went northward from Littleberg with the brigand leader," Chert recalled.

"That's right! The stroke toward Chendl, the arm running to the northwest. One trail false, the other true!" Gord cried in enthusiasm.

Gellor sobered both young men by pointing out that the pattern might have indicated nothing more than points of power in conflict, a concord of such force, or any number of other things. He then spoke encouragement. "Yet, the border area between Furyondy and Veluna offers a good route for one seeking the safety of the Vesve, for that wild forest could hide much. It is the only route that one journeying to meet with Iuz could follow, what with the forces in the south seeking to prevent it and the Horned Lords and their master ravening to the east."

"Finding a dwarf in that forest is as vain as seeking a needle in a haystack," Gord said gloomily.

The barbarian brightened. "Melf recounted how he once did just that, only the pin was magical and there were a multitude of haystacks. He said he'd fired the lot and sifted the ash!"

"Burning down the whole of the Vesve is impractical, to say the least," Gellor commented dryly.

"His recounting the tale has merit, I think," Gord said as the barbarian slumped back in his chair at Gellor's remark. "If this Obmi has the Second Key, then Iuz, much as Melf did, must locate dwarf and key and see them to Dorakaa. The 'smoke' of such 'burning' will leave a distinct trail. No petty escort will be sent to retrieve something so powerful as that piece of artifact!"

"Gord, my young friend," Gellor said with a beaming smile, "you and Chert there are something more than a pair of sharp swords! I begin to think that your mind is keener than that enchanted blade you so prize, for between the two of you have put the point to the vitals. It is to the Vesve Forest's shadowy depths we venture."

"How?" the two young adventurers asked in unison.

"That is easy," interjected Tenser as he strode into the chamber, "if you don't fear waterdragons."

Chapter 20

The rush of green water became darker and more frightening as the monster dived deeper. Huge fish, dwarfed by the bulk of the creature writhing through the depths, darted away in fear. Then a thing only a bit smaller than the monster swam up, but it was unwilling to cope with the ferocity of the would-be meal, and it sank out of sight almost immediately. The monster arrowed through the water a hundred feet beneath the surface, and slowly the light above faded as the sun moved toward the unseen horizon in the west.

Gord could not speak. He, his friends, and a strange, silent man rode the back of the great waterdragon. Those things that would be harmed by immersion were sealed within a metal case as proof against damage. The case and the men were strapped to the scaly back of the monster. It swam so swiftly that even the stout straps would have been sundered were it not for a crystalline shield that sheltered their heads and upper bodies from the force of the water.

Tenser had led them below his castle. Taking a labyrinthine route, they had eventually emerged in a large cavern tilled with water. There lived the waterdragon. Unlike the great dragon turtles, this vast creature had no carapace. It appeared much as would a red dragon, save its wings were vestigial - more like the great flukes of whales - and its feet were webbed. The scales of the waterdragon's back were aquamarine, and its underside the color of old ivory. Where upper and lower scales met there was a band of deepest sea-green color. The monster was beautiful in its way. It was also frightening in aspect. Tenser had explained that the creature was a guardian of his fortress, but he would forego its protection for a time in order for their party to be carried swiftly across the Nyr Dyv to a place from where they could travel by other means. None of the men had understood just how swift their passage was to be.

The spell-binder had somehow signaled, and the silent man and several servants had come into the cavern and attached the rig to the great dragon's back. It made no objection. Rather, the monster gazed fondly at the archmage with its fishlike eyes - something that Gord could but wonder at, for never had he seen expression in the eyes of fish or reptile. Or rather, he thought, any expression but cold hatred or ravening hunger. Tenser stroked the scaled muzzle and fed the dragon fish often- or twelve-pound size. They were like minnows to the maw that snapped them up.

"Never have I seen a waterdragon!" Gellor exclaimed as he admired the great creature.

"They are rare," Tenser admitted. "I have seen only two myself, and when this little fellow grows up he will leave me for the depths of the ocean."

So much for that.

Then each of the three, in turn, was introduced to the monster. It hissed softly at each, and it took all of Gord's resolve not to tremble when his turn came. The creature was not showing anger or giving warning, however, when it vented the sound. The waterdragon was intelligent, and was acknowledging each man as not-food. At least that is what Tenser had told them, and there was every reason to believe he spoke the truth. All the while the archmage crooned and made hissing noises to the monster, and it made odd sounds in reply.

"Now, my friend here agrees to convey you swiftly and safely as far as he can, and there you will be met by others who will see that your journey continues," Tenser said at last. Then he gave each of the three an antique diadem of bronze set with aquamarines and covered with sigils. "These enable you to survive underwater for a time - long enough for your journey and then some. Do not breathe while you have these headbands on! Instead, merely relax and the dweomer of these ancient devices will bring clean air into your bodies and remove the used breath. Return them to my servant when you come to the end of your ride."

The end of the journey came soon enough. The great waterdragon swam tirelessly for more than a dozen hours to bring them to their journey's end - at least that portion that was of watery element. The dragon brought them suddenly into open air, writhed ashore, and, turning its head to gaze at them with huge eyes, hissed farewell. The silent man signaled for them to dismount, holding out his hand for the diadems. The three complied quickly. Their gear was handed down by the fellow, and then waterdragon and rider were gone.

Gilled folk that were neither nixies nor aquatic elves but something similar, yet altogether different, greeted them. Again this "language" was silent, merely signals and gestures whose meaning could not be misunderstood. The adventurers followed their guides to a place in the underground complex of caves where there was a shimmering pool of water. These odd creatures signaled for the adventurers to step into the pool.

"What does this mean?" Gord asked the bard.

Gellor smiled at his two young companions. "I recognize this sort of magic. The pool is attuned to another similar one located elsewhere - in this case, I would suppose the other to be far distant, as Tenser knows where we must go, and these are his associates. Our entry will trigger a dweomer that will carry us instantly from this pool to the other. Shall we go?"

As the strange underground aquanauts watched with unwinking eyes, the three men stepped into the pool.

"All we did was get our feet wetter," Gord muttered as he peered around the grotto. There seemed to be a few more of the strange folk watching them, and perhaps the glowing lichens that illuminated the cave were now emitting more of their phosphors. But that was all the thief could discern.

"As I told you, this is a twin of the other, Gord. Unless I am a knave and fool, we are far distant from that place where we were but an eyeblink ago!"

Again they followed the signs of the gilled folk, and in a minute they were walking along a natural passage that rose steeply upward. The three were alone, the gilled folk gone. Puffing from the exertion of the climb, tired from lack of sleep, they came into the light and open air in a quarter-hour or so. A vast body of water extended before them. The sun was overhead. Sails and buildings could be seen off to the right, a mile or two distant.

"Right you were," noted Chert with a grin. It was obvious they were somewhere else. Now to find where!

"A good time to stretch our legs and dry off," said the bard laconically as he finished strapping on weapons and gear. His companions did likewise, and then the three trooped across a boggy meadow until they came to a road a mile distant. There was commerce here, and Gellor hailed a passing carter plodding his way up the road from the buildings in the distance.

"What city's that?"

"Ain't no city at all!" the rudely dressed man called in reply. "That there's the town o' Crockport." He went on, shaking his head at the total ignorance and foolishness of strangers.

"Crockport?" Gord said, trying to remember where that place was located.

"Never heard of it," the barbarian said with a shrug.

"It's a frontier town of Furyondy," Gellor told them, "located at the southernmost tip of Lake Whyestil. That was some pool. . . . We're north of Chendl by thirty-five leagues and near the eastern edge of the Vesve!"

It took longer than they'd expected, but they arrived in the town tired but dry and cheerful. With a good rest and the acquisition of fast horses, they could be trekking into the fastness of the Vesve Forest tomorrow, still with fair prospects of finding Obmi the dwarf and his prize. This place was too close to enemy territory to begin inquiries for friends or allies, but there were good inns and a thriving market. After a meal and some sleep, the three went about equipping themselves for the expedition.

More than horses and provisions were needed. Gellor sought out a place to purchase maps, for they had precious little idea as to the extent and details of what lay within the Vesve. Chert was anxious to find a longbow, and Gord needed missiles for his sling. The bard went off on his errands while the pair of young adventurers sought a weaponer, hopefully a bowyer, elsewhere.

There were weapons aplenty to be found in Crockport, and in short order the barbarian found a huge bow that tested even his massive arms. With it and two quivers crammed with broad-headed arrows, each over a yard long, they went on to find Gord's needs. This took a little longer, but eventually they located a place that provided Gord with a variety of weights and sizes of tapering lead bullets for his sling. With a quantity of these missiles stored away, and a pair of well-balanced knives tucked in his boots, the young thief was content. Gellor was waiting for them when they returned.

"There's scant information to be had, but I have a pair of crude maps and information from a hunter who has roamed the forest nearby," he said in clipped tones. "Let's be off."

"What's in the leather bag?" Chert asked the bard.

Gellor smiled at that. "Long has it been since you have heard me sing and play, Chert, but the lack is cured. There is a fine little harp, therein, and I feel far better with such an instrument at hand."

With their coursers saddled and bearing bedrolls and saddlebags of provisions, they rode westward out of Crockport just after the sun had passed its zenith. They followed a road that turned gradually northward, skirting the edge of the great forest. It was a no-man's-land that grew wilder and more lonely as they went.

"The map shows a likely place to spend the night," Gellor told his companions. "There's a little village that lies a hard day's ride from the town, but if we press our steeds, they'll carry us there before much of the dark has been spent."

Late in the afternoon they reached a place where the road split into three tracks. One veered toward the lake some ten miles to the east. The central lane continued northward, and the leftmost trail ran westward angled toward the north. Gellor took the latter way, and urged his horse to a faster pace, for there was but an hour or two of light remaining and a long distance yet to go before the village was reached.

"We are hunters," said the bard as he patted the heavy boar-spear strapped beside him. The hour was but two from midnight, and they were near the village at last. No further caution was needed, and the three proceeded into the community, found a tavern that offered accommodations, and there spent a safe and restful night.

The residents were curious to see the strangers, for not many such folk passed their way - at least not many of honest sort, or a group so few in number. They were unmolested, of course, for the three adventurers were obviously tough and capable. Local folk gave them a wide berth, said little, and when the strangers needed anything they bargained sharply, beginning with exorbitant prices and grudgingly lowering them to merely outrageous demands. Gord pretended to be in need of a new spear, while Gellor and Chert casually inquired about the most likely areas to find the great boars for which the area was famous.

The village was, in fact, called Tusham, in recognition of the number of trophies of long, pointed teeth that decorated its tavern and other establishments. Chert, having hunted the ferocious pigs of his own hills, was eager to discuss the habitats and tricks of the local beasts. There was enough of the same stamp among the rustics of the village, so barbarian and yokels were soon telling tall tales and looking wise, Gellor got his additional information, while Gord and Chert ended up buying local boar-spears at only slightly inflated prices. A pair of young lads wanted to guide the three adventurers, for there was a famous old boar in the neighborhood. They said it was a devil in pig's hide, actually, but that three skilled hunters such as these strangers were could certainly bring it to bay and slay it. Gellor shooed them off, and the trio was soon out of Tusham and heading into the dim Vesve.

They followed a narrow path that wended its way westward into the heart of the spreading forest. After an hour or so this path diverged, one fork tending toward the south a bit, the other seeming to curve northward. That was the direction desired, and they took the upper trail after a moment of

pondering. There were occasional side paths, for here and there some woodcutter or hunter had his home.

As Gellor had been told, they came to a hermit's cave in a low cliff that bordered a small woodland stream. The recluse was not to be seen, and after drinking and filling their waterskins, they rode on, chewing tough sausages and bits of dried fruit as they went. The path faded into nothingness thereafter, but there were numerous game traits that meandered and crisscrossed. The woodland had been light, with patches of scrub and dense undergrowth where forestation or brushfire had been at work upon its verge.

Now the boles were massive, rising to leafy crowns high above, and their limbs intertwined to make the forest floor dim and free of growth above stirrup height. The trails led to an occasional meadow or small clearing at first, but then the little tracks became fewer and the places where sunlight reached and grass grew scarce. Although the forest was not hard to pass through, it was difficult to keep to a single direction. The sun was hidden and the trails meandered confusingly between the thick trunks of the forest giants - ipp and roanwoods dwarfing oaks that were hundreds of years old. Chert was happy here, and both Gellor and Gord had sufficient skill at woodcraft to be able to remain on a northerly route.

At nightfall the bard told them they were now in the territory frequented by the herds of wild pigs. They made certain that they were armed with their spears as they made camp and gathered fuel for the fire. Chert slipped away to see if he could find any game for supper in the half-hour of purple twilight that remained. He returned with an enormous squirrel whose coat was of sooty hue. His chagrin at having found nothing bigger was changed to unease when the bard told him that such giants as the squirrel he had brought down were a sure sign of evil. They found it tasty anyway, roasted on a spit over the cherry embers of their small fire.

"You say that such limb-lopers as that are found only in forests of eldritch sort?" asked Chert again.

"Why are you surprised at that?" the bard countered. "You know that the cambion's servants use the heart of the Vesve as a highway, and we are making for that evil core. It is encouraging to find a creature of that ilk so soon . . . the trails of Iuz must be nearer than I thought."

Gord, not at all disturbed about the nature of the rodent, was thinking of the great swine that made their home in the area. "And the wild boars? What about the tale of the one who is diabolical?" he asked.

"Devils and demons don't mix, as they say," Gellor said with a small shrug. "Still, perhaps the beast could be some form of demon, possessed or in swine-form - or even a were-form of that sort. Let us hope that we can avoid confrontation with a boar of any kind. If not, then we must slay quick and sure. There are more important things we must accomplish than sticking pigs, mundane or supernatural."

"Let it be a plain old tusker!" exclaimed Chert enthusiastically. "Second Key or no, a big tusker roasted over an open fire is a dish I haven't tasted in far too long."

Gellor had been only half-listening as the giant hillman spoke of such feasting. Without commenting, Gellor quietly opened the leather bag with its little harp nestled upon the velvet that lined it. He sat back, ran his fingers experimentally across the silver strings, and made rippling melodies play around the firelit little clearing. Both young men watched and listened in fascination. Gellor left off the runs and rills, playing instead a melody and singing a ballad that bespoke the comradery and gladness of a forest camp at the coming of night. The song lasted for minutes.

Before it concluded, two forms emerged from the shadowy dark just beyond the edge of the campfire's light and joined the listeners.

Chapter 21

While Gord and his companions sought the evil dwarf Obmi deep in the Vesve Forest, events elsewhere began to lead toward a resolution of the matter.

Somewhere in the mountains to the west, a great citadel stood, carved from the basalt and obsidian of the peaks themselves. The fortress was cloaked magically, so that only a few knew where it stood, and fewer of those dared to go near it. Within the sprawling complex were many sorts of folk, including the dwarven miners who dug the rich veins of platinum from the depths of the massifs and the gnomish smiths who beat it into coins of finely wrought jewelry. Others, men and elves, carried the product of the mining and Grafting further west into Perrenland and Ket, southward to Highfolk and Veluna, and east into the sprawling Kingdom of Furyondy. The citadel was the demesne of Mordenkainen and the various folk were all who owned him as their liege.

The affairs of others seldom interested the archmage, but of late he had been troubled by news from his agents. These included spies who roamed the domain of Iuz and actually entered the dreaded city of Dorakaa, or rode the plains of the Hierarchs and drank in the sinks of Molag. All said that Evil bestirred itself. There were rumors of a concerted effort, even strange flashes of power in the cosmos. Mordenkainen took heed of all this. Emissaries of magical and ordinary type as well went forth to alert heads of state and other cryptic groups and powerful individuals to what the archmage had learned. With them went a pledge of assistance and a promise to resist the growing coalition of malign forces. The knowledge sent hinted most abstrusely at the existence of the tripartite artifact and its First Key. Those who were great in knowledge of arcane and recondite subjects knew then that the world stood in great peril.

Back came more bits and pieces of information and assurances of cooperation. The elvenfolk of Highfolk and their nominal subjects within the edges of Vesve Forest made alliance with Mordenkainen and the force called the Obsidian Citadel. Seldom had they quarreled anyway, and the arch-mage's vassals included many tribes of wild grugach and wood elves. Agents came and went from secret places, bearing more secret communications. It happened that one of these agents managed to bring Iuz his first intelligence regarding the Artifact of All Evil and alert the cambion as to the likely whereabouts of the Second Key. Thus Obmi, the worst of

Iuz's "Secret Six," managed to find the item where it was hidden in the lost temple.

The host raised by the Scarlet Brotherhood, meanwhile, had floundered through the Suss Forest and upward to the Welkwood. Confused and slow, they had been harassed by the woodsmen and elves in the process of their march. Furious at their inability to locate something already far beyond their reach, the "Brothers" gathered a still greater force. Goblins and hobgoblins and any other of the vicious humanoids who could be found were conscripted to fight beside the bandits, brigands, and scum who served as auxiliaries for the main body. This army was composed of the highly trained and rigidly disciplined regiments of the Brotherhood. Its advance guard was a thousand strong, and behind that regiment were four others. Such size was actually why the force was ineffective. It was increased by the addition of thousands of men and humanoids.

So large a horde could not fail but to attract attention. The army had to eat and its scurvy auxiliaries had to slay and burn. The whole rolled northward slowly, and then turned away from the forests to stab into the pastoral countryside of Celene. The elvish monarchy was awaiting. They fell upon the horde almost immediately, and a great pitched battle raged for two days thereafter.

There fell the Marshal of Celene, Lord Parseval. With him many other noble elves and men were slain as well. As spell-caster fought spell-caster, the plying of bow and spear, sword and axe, took the worst toll. Of the "cousins," "nephews," and "brothers" of the Scarlet Sign there was a great slaughter. Afterward, their regiments had no heart and fought fiercely but without direction. So they died. Brigand companies and allied humanoids simply melted away, fleeing this way or that. Those that went east, back to the Welkwood, were ambushed or hunted down and then exterminated. In this manner an assassin sometimes known as Blonk was brought low by Deirdre, a Lady Knight of Hardby, while the great company of outlaws whom he had led was slain to a man by the banner of riders and footmen who served her. Some few managed to remain alive by fleeing north or south. Those who escaped to the south eventually returned to the Pomarj to tell of the terrible battle.

Those who went northward found another fate.

At the northern edge of the Kron Hills, where the fringe of the great Gnarley Forest sent no more of its briars and oaks toward the setting sun,

stand the ruins of a large building. Once active, the place is now generally shunned, for another battle was fought near it and its builders slain or gone in defeat. The place is, of course, the Temple of Elemental Evil - its ruin, rather - as any local serf or peasant farm-boy from the neighborhood could tell you. Other than an occasional group of adventurous explorers seeking forgotten treasure, nobody goes to the temple. Bad, evil things haunt the place still.

To this very place came a company of another sort - goodly clerics, stout cavaliers and soldiers too, and a magic-user or two as well. They came because a dire warning said that some being of great evil still lurked there, imprisoned in the temple but about to be loosed. They traveled quickly and with grim purpose.

They were greeted by a mass of fugitives. These evil men and malign humanoids were spoiling for revenge, and they lay in wait for the company. These outlaws had strong and fearsome leaders now, folk from the hidden places beneath the temple and others too. They thought to kill the clerics and knights and all the rest. The evil leaders left them, though, and as most of their fellows had done earlier, these survivors did now. They were killed on the field. The battle, small and brief as it actually was, comparatively speaking, took its toll on the company. There was a delay for meditation and prayer, for healing and rest, to prepare for the entry into the Temple of Elemental Evil.

Time had been purchased at a price held cheap and meaningless by those within the place. A great personage, an ancient magus, a feared and mighty one of eld, had come among the few who still remained within the precincts of the ruin. She it was who set the ambush, brought the delay, and gained the time for her ends. The company came, ready again to face any foe of evil nature. Into the temple they came, driving all before them. Downward they plunged, sending undead things back to the pits from which they came, destroying the lurking monsters who would otherwise prey upon mankind. Deep and deeper they went, seeking what they knew they must find.

Even as they finally discovered the confining place and readied for the great confrontation, a pair of ghastly figures sprang upward, passing through stone and earth as if it were air. Too late had these archclerics and doughty fighters come. Iggwilv, Mother of Evil, had come before them and freed the demoness Zuggtmoy. But as these minions of Good lamented their failure, there were those not allied to Evil who rejoiced at Iggwilv's success.

Mordenkainen, one who had secretly aided the plan to free the monstrous demoness, was among them.

Thirteen stone chairs stand above the many lesser seats in the Hall of Dread in Molag. Five to either hand are smaller and lower than the three in the center. Thirteen thrones for the thirteen Hierarchs, the Dread and Awful Presences who rule the Horned Society. Only three of the chairs were empty. The trio of the tallest thrones remained vacant as the Hierarchs took their places - five to the right, five to the left. Officials and military officers filed in to stand below the thrones.

Down the isle left unusually broad by the press of lesser masters of the Horned Society - humanoid chieftains, bandit leaders, all - wafted a terrible stench. As the foul odor came, the ranks compacted tighter still, and a wide space was made wider by this movement. Behind the decaying stink came something from which eyes turned away in revulsion. Before the thrones and the ten Hierarchs came Anthraxus the Decayed, Daemonking of Hades. It is worthy of note that the ten who sat upon the stone chairs did not avert their eyes as the monstrous figure glided toward them.

"Greetings, Lord of Glooms," said the greatest of the remaining ten Hierarchs, acknowledging Anthraxus by the least of his titles as if in challenge.

The Daemonking made no sign that he had noticed the affront. "And to you all," the thing replied in a voice that seemed to issue from an empty chest and a throat choked with maggots. "I am come at the behest of Nerull to assist you in your war."

None of the ten flinched at the mention of the war, even though they had only today received news that masses of Iuz's troops were marching through the northern regions of their realm. Again the greatest spoke.

"We serve Evil and acknowledge Nerull as Overlord. We likewise serve the same ends as Thee, but why is it that Our One Master does not Himself come?"

The great oinodaemon sneered and puffed out a cloud of foetid breath in answer. "Play not fools, you remaining Hierarchs! Isn't the loss of three of your number enough to teach you your place?"

The spokesman seemed totally unaffected by the implication of the question. "You mean as His servants?" he replied in an icy, level tone.

"What else?" Anthraxus shot back in a voice that would sicken any normal listener.

"Of course, Lord of Glooms, just as you come to us . . ." and the spokesman allowed his voice to trail off but raised a finger and spoke again. "The Three who represented Tar-terus, Hades, and Gehenna are gone. We have not yet had the trials which will elevate three of our own number to these exalted positions - and bring three lessers to sit with the Ten. Until we are Three and Ten once again, our power is insufficient against that rebel who opposes the Unification!"

"You waste My time!" Anthraxus said in a voice that coughed and choked.

"No, Master of Daemonkind, you are wasting your time - and ours too. We Ten erred, but not as did the former Three. It is not my place to question the removal of the offenders by the Master of Us All, but I do state now that unless the Society is given aid, we - and the Unification - are in jeopardy."

"Do not place undue importance on yourselves or your petty realm!" the oinodaemon wheezed angrily.

"Then why did Lord Nerull send you to us?" the speaker asked mildly.

Anthraxus shook his rotting, ramlike head in frustration. "I am come to make certain you make no further errors!"

"And . . ."

"To aid you against the might of that fungi-fornicating, toad-spawned, whelp of a miserable little demon princeling, Iuz!"

The spokesman nodded, with neither pride nor fear in expression or the voiced statement that followed. "Now we understand fully, Lord of Hades, but there is that which must be spoken. What if the cambion gains the Second Key?"

"Then you will take it from him," the ghastly, diseased voice of the oinodaemon rasped, "and I shall be there to see you do not fail again!"

Bits of decaying matter fell from Anthraxus, dropping here and there as he went. The oinodaemon had been standing before the Ten of the Hierarchs for an extended period, and a small circle of the putrescent matter had accumulated around his filthy greatcloak. As he was about to turn and leave, he saw the faces of the enthroned Ten turn pale, eyes start, hands shake. He followed their staring gaze down to the hem of the garment, where the litter of rotting stuff oozed and stank. The stuff had become a fairy ring of fungi, tiny zygoms sprouting from the rot.

At that moment Anthraxus felt fear crawl through his plagued body.

Obmi and the crazed elf, Keak, moved carefully once they were well beyond Littleberg. They rode sharply west to gain the no-man's-land between Veluna and Furyondy. Once therein, they veered northward again toward the great forest above. It was dangerous going for them, with patrols to avoid, groups of bandits to dodge or evade, and occasional brushes with feral animals or night-stalking monsters to deal with. Despite all that, Obmi was satisfied with their progress. Keak had told the dwarf about the curious elf, the last probable pursuer they had. But none followed, none knew where he went, and he had the prize!

Scarcely a sennight after leaving Littleberg, they came to the seedy little village of Stump. Obmi sought an agent of Iuz there, but none were to be found. In fact, because of Keak they were virtually treated as untouchables by the folk of the village. The residents of Stump had a reputation for aiding and abetting outlaws and reavers if they were paid. There were places to dispose of stolen goods in the village, brothels and a gambling hall for disposing of excess coin. Elven knights had been to the village just days before. Their men-at-arms (elves-at-arms, to be correct) had searched the whole community and discovered property that could be identified as stolen goods. Villagers were hanged on the spot, and a half-dozen were carried off for questioning. That, Obmi thought, explained why there was no help for them there. They stayed and debauched themselves a day or two anyway, for the dwarf thought a second visit from the knights improbable.

As he had hoped, a scar-faced half-orc and several men appeared in Stump asking for a dwarf. The villagers, thinking that these ruffians had come to kill both Obmi and Keak, cheerfully directed the group to where the dwarf and elf swilled cheap wine and sported. Obmi killed the proprietor of the establishment as he looked expectantly for an attack upon the pair of customers he would have murdered himself if he dared. Laughing, Keak dragged the best-looking of the women from the place. In a few minutes they were riding into the edge of the towering forest, and the low folk of the village quickly forgot that they had ever been in Stump.

The going was slow but steady. The half-orc was the leader and the three men who served him were skilled woodsmen. After seeing the dwarfs hammer in action, none questioned his assumption of leadership. Keak was even more feared than Obmi because of the elfs absolute unpredictability. There were stations - lone huts, tiny thorps, or hidden places - where they found a safe night's rest, food, even fresh mounts. After a few days more

men and a handful of arboreal ores joined them as reinforcements. The arboreal ores were new to both Obmi and Keak. The creatures seemed to show a strong strain of ape, and this fascinated both dwarf and elf.

Eventually, Keak gave the woman to the ape-ores and they soon killed her.

By then the band was halfway through the Vesve, and Iuz sent Obmi word that a fitting escort was coming to bring them safely to Dorakaa.

At this same time, almost at the same moment, Mordenkainen himself took the field. With him were his trusted henchmen of old, as well as the gray elf fighter and magic-user, Melf, and several companies of deadly elves and hard foresters. The archmage had waited quietly as the Second Key came ever nearer to him. Now he would strike quickly, take the thing, and return with it to the Citadel. Then let Evil rave and threaten, let the forces of Good demand. He would hold the Key and with it would withstand such threats easily.

As long as the factions of the malign fought and quarreled, as long as men established nations and states and fought among themselves, this long would there be need for those who saw the whole as a slowly turning wheel. Neutral, even though generally despising true evilness, the Obsidian Citadel would remain strong and assist the balance. The possession of the Second Key guaranteed that.

Why then, Mordenkainen wondered as he set about his foray, did the Hierophants of the Cabal not support him? Jealousy, he supposed. That must be the reason.

Chapter 22

"Never have I heard such music," breathed one.

The other sat silently, still hearing the singing perhaps, and made no reply.

"What are your names?" the bard asked quietly.

"I am called Thatcher - or Thatch, as my friends say," the taller of the two lads answered.

"And I am Shad, although the folk of the village make it to be Shadow, for I follow my friend Thatch," the one who had been silent piped.

Gellor nodded and smiled. "We are glad to have you at our fire, Thatch and Shad. Why did you follow us here?"

"Well, sir," the gangling boy said with a nervous swallow, "Shad and I want to be hunters. When we heard you speak of wild boar, we decided to join you. . . . If you slay the devil-pig, you'll be famous hereabouts, and then so will we!"

The boy called Shadow bounced in eager agreement. "We heard where you were going, so we cut through the forest and got ahead of you. When you passed it was easy to follow."

Gord looked at Chert, and the big barbarian shrugged. Gellor had somehow brought the boys into their camp with his singing, that was clear Gord wanted to know if the bard knew when he began the melody that the boys, or somebody, was near. He had heard nothing, and it seemed that Chert had likewise been unaware of the presence of the two. The young thief remained silent, though, allowing Gellor to do all the talking. The one-eyed man was certainly getting answers.

"Why did you come so close?"

"We couldn’t make our own fire, so we had to be near yours for protection. There's things in the night, you know, which would gladly have us for their dinner," Thatch responded. "I am sorry we disturbed you by coming into the circle, but when you sang and played we just had to - . ."

"No matter, boys. We're pleased you joined us, aren't we?" and as he spoke the latter he glanced meaningfully at his comrades.

Chert rumbled a greeting, and Gord nodded and smiled.

"There," Gellor said. "We are all friends here. Tell me, what did you hear us talking about?"

"Oh . . ." Thatch said, and then he looked toward his friend for help. Shad looked away, shifting nervously.

Gellor looked at the bigger youth and prompted him to go on by saying, "It's fine to say whatever you like when you're with boon company!"

"I know, sir, but I am confused. You are hunters, the boldest-looking hunters we have ever seen in Tusham! We know that you've come to slay the tuskers - maybe get the devil-pig himself - and we heard you speak of running from them," Thatch said with a note of betrayal in his voice.

"Shad, did you hear that?" Gellor asked.

Shad grinned. "I'm not a post! I heard everything," and with that he turned to his taller friend and said, "Thatch, I'll wager that it's treasure they're after! Why else get away from pigs when you're a hunter?" Thatch made no reply to that, so the eager-faced lad turned and looked at Chert, Gord, and finally Gellor as he asked, "It is a treasure, isn't it? The key you talked about opens a big chest full of silver and gold, doesn't it? The evil place is where some dragon hides its hoard, right?"

"Hmmm," the bard said, stroking his chin. "You are as keen-eared as an owl. You must not mention any of what you heard ever again. Shad? Thatch? Understood?"

Both lads agreed readily enough, and Thatch added, "We'll help you get it, and that way we won't be around others to tell them the secret." Gellor shook his head at that. "No, my good lads, we could never expose you to the dangers we must face for the journey, let alone the conclusion - the treasure, shall we say. In the morning you must go home.

"Yes, sir," Thatch said with a downcast expression.

"But, Thatch," the smaller lad cried in disbelief, "we can't go back to Tusham without a trophy - and maybe even with one we can't. Clydebo kill us for sure!"

"Now you shut your chop-trap, Shad, or I'll - "

"Enough of that, m'lads!" the bard thundered. Thatch had stood up as he spoke and clenched his fists. Shad had been ready to fight too, when the command came. Both plopped back to the leaf-covered ground, sheepishly looking at their hands. "We're friends here, and we don't squabble and fight like a flock of jackdaws. Mind your manners! Now, what's this about someone harming you?"

"Shad means Clydebo, the Chief Hunter. We ... ah ... borrowed some of his . . . things so we could come with you."

Gellor looked sternly at the two. "Borrowed? Do you mean you stole something belonging to this Clydebo?"

"I ... I guess you'd say that, sir. But we'll bring everything back - won't we, Thatch?" said the small lad in a pleading voice.

Thatch decided to make a clean breast of it. "We knew that you'd kill many boars - even the one that's a devil! We'll never get to be hunters unless someone like you will let us learn. Else I have to be a thatcher, just like my name, and Shad there'll end up as a tailor."

"What did you take?" asked the one-eyed bard gently.

"Boar-spears, some old leggings, a lodencloak, a flatchet, and a rucksack," the tall lad ticked off the list.

"We needn't any of his other stuff, for I'd taken a leather poke full of grub and a big knife from my uncle already," volunteered Shad.

At that Gord had to laugh. Thatch scowled at his small friend. Before he could say anything about this addition, Shad went on.

"Don't be cross, Thatch. I didn't say anything about the stuff you took from your master!"

"Master, you say? Are you a prenticed boy?" interjected Gellor.

"Aye, both Shad and I are. He to his kinfolk, though, and I to old Reed."

Stealing was bad - bad enough to get the boys flogged and bound to their victims to work out twice the value of the stolen goods, recovered or no. Stealing things from a master by an apprentice was worse still. If the master chose, he could sell the thief into slavery in redress for the crime. Worst of all, the theft from Clydebo was of relatively high value, and the goods taken were those of his livelihood. That usually meant hanging. All three of the adventurers looked at the lads in wonderment. What could these boys have been thinking of?

"That won't matter, you see," Thatch said almost as if he had read the men's minds. "The prentice-breaking nor the borrowing of the stuff, that is. You're going to kill wild boars aplenty. The devil-pig that's got everyone in Tusham scared to go into the woods, too! We'll help, and the whole village will call us heroes! We'll give everything back, and Clydebo will have a trophy from us to boot. Then we can be hunters!"

"No, we can't!" countered little Shad glumly. "Don't you recall that they said they weren't going to look to pig-sticking? We got in trouble for naught, Thatch."

Gellor looked grim. "Where was this Clydebo the hunter when you made free with his gear?" he asked.

"Out after game, sir," said Thatch weakly.

"They could sneak back into the village before anyone's up," Gord said. "Then, after replacing what they stole from Clydebo, they can creep back to their own homes. They'll have to take a few whacks, that's sure. But a few commons or a silver noble even will soothe any feelings of anger. Besides, they can claim we forced them to show us the way through the forest and made them take the food, too."

Chert looked doubtful. "That's pretty thin, Gord," he said.

"It's all we've got."

"No argument there," interjected Gellor. "But I like it not. The story is likely to be questioned, and these two know about . . . other things, shall we say."

"We'd never, never betray the truth about you hunting for treasure, not boar," Thatch said earnestly.

"We can't go back, though," Shad chimed in, "'cause we saw Clydebo in the afternoon heading back to Tusham. He's found his spears and equipment missing for certain, and tomorrow he'll be on our trail with a vengeance."

"That tears it! What on Oerth are we to do with you two?!" the bard demanded, his tone halfway between mirth and anger.

"Why, that's easy!" Thatch shot back with abroad, wholesome grin. "We'll help you get the treasure, Shad and I. Even with just a little share of it, a small part suited to boys like us, we'll be the wealthiest folk in the whole village. We'll tell them all how we used the spears to help kill the evil dragon that guarded the gold, and Clydebo will hang the pair on his wall in honor! We'll pay ten times the -"

"Enough, enough," Gellor said in exasperation. "Bring your gear to the fire and bed down with us. We'll settle the matter in the morning. A good sleep will clear the muzziness of your tangled scheme from my head, and I'll be able to solve the problem then."

Standing proudly as men, but still sheepish about their predicament, the two lads hurried off to bring in their weapons, provisions, and bedrolls.

"How did you net these two slippery little fish?" Chert asked the one-eyed man.

Gellor covered himself with his cloak, getting ready for sleep, as he replied. "I saw someone outside the firelight - thanks to a peep with my enchanted orb. My music has certain powers, and when I played and sang, I drew them in with a warm feeling of home and good friends. Had they been ogres, I doubt they'd have behaved differently."

"Well," Gord opined, "these lads are not ogres, and we can't leave them to their fate."

"Would you rather they died with us fighting hardened soldiers and fell spell-binders?" Gellor grumped from his bed of leaves.

"At least with us they'll have a chance," the barbarian said just before the two boys reappeared bearing armloads of gear. That ended the conversation for the night.

While the others were readying for travel the next morning, Gord took a scrap of paper and wrote out a message.

"To Clydebo the Hunter," it read. "Be made aware that we have need of the service of two boys, Thatch and Shad by name. One of these electrum pieces is to cover what was taken from you, with another just like it for good measure. And there are two more luckies here, one for each of the boy's masters. Give them to their rightful owners. We will return soon to learn if you did!" He signed it "The Three Who Hunt Devils."

Gord tucked the message and the electrum pieces in a place where it would be evident to a keen-eyed woodsman, and made a small blaze above it just to be sure. Gellor gave a small cough, and Gord looked up, startled. Gellor pretended to be relieving himself on the tree, but the bard's expression showed that he'd seen the whole thing. Gord gave a small shrug, and Gellor returned a disapproving look.

"You are determined to bring these boys into grief," he said with resignation. "Then be it on your head - and the curly mop of that hulking friend who supports you in this - not on mine." With that he mounted and began to ride away. There was a scramble to get the last of the gear onto the horses or slung over youthful backs, and the remaining four hurried off after the bard. Gord and Chert rode, and the two boys trotted happily after the horses.

Neither Thatch nor Shad could ride very well, but the two young adventurers gave them their turns atop their mounts anyway. "This way you'll learn, for learn you must!" Gord scolded the reluctant boys.

"It'll spare your arses some, too!" said Chert with a laugh as he recalled the pain of becoming accustomed to the saddle.

During a brief pause to get bearings, eat, and rest, the lads were instructed in the proper handling of the broad-bladed, cross-pieced spears they lugged along. Each weapon consisted of a stout shaft, one of hickory, the other of hornwood. The spears were taller than the lads, but not by

much, for each was just a little over five and a half feet long. What the weapons lacked in length they made up in girth, for the shafts were as thick as quarterstaves. The steel spearheads were sharp and thick for strength and bloodletting, and their fastening cupped the shafts and extended nearly a foot past the cross-piece.

"You'd suppose," Chert told the raptly attentive lads, "that a blade a hand's-span wide and a foot long would do for a boar, wouldn't you?"

The boys nodded certainty as they looked, awestruck, at the wicked spearhead that the giant hillman held as if it were merely a toothpick.

"Well, you're wrong!" Chert continued. "A maddened tusker will take this bit of steel in his chest without flinching, just to get at you. If this bar wasn't at the base of the blade, that tusker would push himself on, running the whole damned spear through his vitals, just to tear you to bloody ribbons with his tusks! Then he'd trample you into mush before he fell dead on top of your guts and broken bones." There was a certain relish in Chert's voice at this description of what could happen.

Both Thatch and Shad turned pale and looked sick upon hearing his very graphic words. They were bright and imaginative lads, and they were now beginning to reconsider their desire to be boar-killing hunters. Chert gave each a reassuring swat and spoke again.

"Never mind. There is a cross-piece, so if the shaft doesn't snap the pig'll be held off to bleed himself to death in a squealing, foaming rage. It's their lust to kill that does for boars, you know. . . . Now, see the spike here at the butt?" He moved the weapon so that the lads could get a close look at the metal-shod base. A fingerlike spike protruded from the endcap. "This is to hold the weapon solidly. You see the boar. It charges! You lower the spear and aim the point, so! See how the butt is grounded? You can use a tree or the like too, depending on where you are."

"No use when mounted," Gord pointed out. "Clydebo goes afoot, but boar-spears for horsed hunting are longer and lack the spike."

"Now notice the difference when you're fighting with this spear rather than setting up for a charging tusker," Chert said. And so it went for all that day and the next while they kept a watch for signs of danger and the outlaw's road through the forest.

There were swine around, of that there was no doubt. They heard them and occasionally caught glimpses of the great wild pigs dashing away at their approach. None attacked, though, as if even the tuskers feared to

encounter them. This disappointed the boys and Chert too, for the hillman still thought a loin of boar roasted over their evening fire would be most toothsome.

It was the afternoon of the second day that brought their first incident. Chert was riding in the lead, Gellor at the rear, with Gord and the boys going in between. As they rounded a corner where a game trail swerved past a massive yew and entered a small clearing, a piglet dashed across the path. Reflexively, Chert drew his bow and sped an arrow after the creature. The shaft pierced the piglet, which squealed shrilly as the projectile pinned it fast to the ground. There was an answering grunt and deeper squeal as the sow poked her head out from the brush. The barbarian had nocked another arrow, but before he could react, a deeper voice came from almost beside him.

"The boar!" Gord called, and he swung his spear down in the direction of the noise as he said it. There was a flash of reddish brown, a ridged back covered with bristles, and then the impact as the spear-point took the animal high on his shoulder. Although the boar was not large for his kind, no more than a few hundred pounds and a bit over three feet high, he was ferocious enough for the young thief. The impact nearly knocked Gord from his saddle as the blade he had lowered plowed a gory furrow along the animal's back before finally lodging in the beast's hindquarters and forcing the boar to the ground.

The boar voiced his fury in terrible snorts and squeals, kicking himself erect and trying to slash horse and rider with his massive, twisted tusks. Chert dared not spare an arrow on the creature, for at any time the sow, nearly as big as its mate, might charge too.

Thatch and Shad acted before Gellor could come to Gord's assistance. Although neither of the boys knew exactly what to do, they acted instinctively and stabbed at the boar's flank with their own weapons. The great animal threw himself toward these new tormentors, knocking both lads down by the force of his reaction. By then, however, Gord had let loose the shaft of the spear and whipped out his sword. It plunged into the boar's neck at the same instant that Gellor's spear pierced the animal's evil heart, and the boar collapsed with a final, shrill grunt. At that the sow ran off, her line of sounders trailing behind in a rush of squealing and grunting piglets, and was quickly lost in the forest.

"Nice work!" the big barbarian said.

"That was a near thing, Gord," Gellor commented. "Be more careful in the future, both of you," he admonished his friends. Then he eyed Thatch and Shad. They'd picked themselves up, brushed the dirt and leaves from their clothing, picked up their fallen spears, and now leaned upon them with expressions of a comical sort. Studied nonchalance and pride, intermingled with surprise at their own daring and fear - both of what could have happened to them and what their adult companions would say - fought with each other in varying and changing degree. Most of all, however, their desire for acceptance was evident.

"You were brave, lads," Gellor said. "But you were very lucky, too. Next time remember what Chert and Gord have been teaching you!"

That broke the tension, and the two boys laughed and danced in ritual fashion around the dead boar, pretending to stab it and placing their feet triumphantly upon the mammoth carcass.

"Enough of that child's play!" called Chert to the rollicking pair. "Go bring me that piglet - and mind you, save the arrow too," he added sternly. "When that's done, you're going to learn how to skin and dress pigs."

They made camp early, and at last the brawny hillman got his fill of pork - both piglet and slices of boar. Eat as they did, all five of them, they could not make much of a dent in the succulent stuff. Pig meat would be on the bill of fare for quite a few meals to come, but they were too happy to think of so dull a matter as that during or after die feast.

Both Thatch and Shad proudly displayed a pair of tushes as they went on the next day. Gord had drilled the teeth and thonged them, so each boy had a necklace displaying a trophy. The hide and most of the meat was abandoned perforce. If they had tried to take the stuff it would have spoiled in a day or two. Some creatures of the forest would eat well, and they had sufficient for today and tomorrow.

They were still congratulating themselves when they came upon the mutilated corpse of a woman who had been killed only hours before. Just beyond the body was a well-beaten trail that ran north and south.

Chapter 23

"Losels!" little shad exclaimed in horror as he saw the awful remains. He ran away to the bushes, and shortly thereafter the others heard sounds of vomiting.

Chert looked at the body and felt sickened himself, even as hardened to such things as he was. "What do you think, Gord?" he asked.

"Gellor is the one to ask," said the young adventurer, averting his eyes from the blood and gore.

"Why did he mention 'lost ones' - losels - when he viewed this terrible thing that's been done?" the bard asked Thatch.

The boy stood and stared at the gruesome sight as if transfixed. If he heard Gellor's question, Thatch made no reply. The bard took him firmly by the shoulders and turned him so that he faced away from the body and had to look at the man, whose kind expression bolstered him. "Come now, Thatch my lad!" said Gellor softly. "It is terrible, I'll grant you, but as a hunter and treasure-seeker you'll have to grow to accept such sights - just never like them!"

"Yes . . . sir," Thatch gulped and stammered, tears springing from his eyes. "I ... I can stand butchering and dressing, Master Gellor, but . . . but what was done to that woman..."

"Never mind that now. There's nothing we can do to save her. She is dead, and that's a fact. I want to know why Shad cried 'losels' when he saw the body. Do you know why?"

"We've heard it before, sir, in the village. We didn't see anything - they wouldn't show us - but just a week or so back two of the local folk, a woodcutter and his wife, were found butchered most terribly. The priest of Pholtus told us that losels did such work. What with the devil-pig and the losels, nobody's wanted to go far from Tusham lately."

Neither lad knew exactly what losels were, although Shad said he had heard one of the village elders state that they were part man and part ape. Gellor set all of them straight.

"I have some small experience with them," he told his companions. "They are hybrid things, these losels are, that much is true. They're not human at all, though. The losel is a mixture of ore and boreamandrill - the thick-furred northern baboons of vicious nature and sly cunning. Once we encountered a small tribe of them in the Fellreev Forest, but at that time I thought them a sport confined to that place."

"How do you know that the perpetrators of this . . . foulness . . . are actually losels, as the lads seem to believe?" Gord asked. "There seem to be no clues here."

Now Shad had sufficiently composed himself to volunteer information. "It's the fingers - the losels take them," he managed to stammer. "That's just as we were told!"

"It's what I've seen before, Gord," agreed Gellor. "It seems that these fiends are here in the Vesve now too, and that points directly at a purpose. If Iuz didn't want these losels here, they'd never have crossed westward to this woodland from distant Fellreev - it's a hundred leagues and more from fl there to the beginning of the upper forest, and we're no more than in the center of the place now."

"Let's bury the remains," Chert said harshly, "so we can be looking to even the score a bit with these ore-apes."

Not long thereafter they were moving rapidly up the hard-packed earth of the trail. The five went northward, Chert trotting now well in advance of the others, Gord, likewise dismounted, served as the rear guard. Thatch and Shad rode behind the bard, clutching their weapons and looking grim. They were rapidly changing from carefree village lads to hardened men, and the three adults didn't like the manner of their forced maturity. Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do to soften the shock of such experiences, and they knew that worse was in the offing.

About an hour after noon Chert ran back and signaled a halt. Gord hurried ahead to join the group and hear what the barbarian had to report.

"I got a glimpse of a foraging party ahead," said Chert. "About five or six rogues wearing forester's green. They didn't see me at all, though, for they were busy toting a stag they'd brought down. One of them was bitching about not getting a fair share of the kill, so I'd say that there must be a big bunch of his pals up ahead - not too far ahead, either."

Gellor didn't seem surprised. "This path is too hard and beaten to reveal much, although the marks of the horses some ride stand out clearly enough. Any idea how many there might be?"

"Not really," the barbarian said, "although the way the tracks are spread to either side of the trail, I'd make a stab at a party of more than a score - could be two or three times that many, though."

"Let's stay back for now," Gord suggested. "Tonight I'll see about finding a member of that bunch who'll tell us what we need to know."

Shad was puzzled. "How you do that, Master Gord? There aren't going to be any of them who'll want to talk to us to help us."

"They will after I bring them back here and persuade them a bit," Gord said in an offhand manner.

"Persuade?" queried Thatch.

"Sure!" Chert said to the boy with a wink, and then made a stabbing and twisting with his hand. "Persuade!"

Both boys looked greenish until they recalled the corpse of the woman these outlaws had left behind. Then they nodded sagely in agreement. "That sounds like a splendid plan," they chimed.

The five resumed their march, going more slowly now. Chert was on full alert for other foragers, stragglers, or a squad coming south to make certain the back trait was free of enemies. Whether by luck or carelessness on the part of the band they followed, there was no incident. Near dusk Chert and Gord changed places. The barbarian stayed behind with the horses and the two boys while Gord and Gellor moved on up the track to determine how close their enemies might be. Neither was unaware of the danger into which they were heading, but this didn't slow either one or inhibit their determination. At last they were coming to grips with the enemy, and it might well be the one whom they had sought so long at that. Only let it be sot.

About a mile from where they had left their comrades and their horses, the two scouts heard noise, albeit faint sounds, that seemed to come from ahead and above. Gord peered in the direction of the rustling and muttering, being careful to conceal his body behind a tree bole. He saw movement. "Damn!" he said softly, pointing toward the leafy branches ahead as he did so.

"I see them," Gellor whispered in reply. Several manlike shapes were visible amid the upper portions of a pair of trees that stood on either side of the trail. "Losels - must be sentries," he mouthed.

Gord motioned, and both men retreated a few yards to where they couldn't be seen or heard by the arboreal guards.

"The main party must have called a halt for the night," Gord commented. "Even though most of them can probably see as well in the dark as in daylight, the dangers of attack by predators are great enough to make those bastards take shelter until dawn."

"I agree," Gellor said to his friend. "Do you still want to try grabbing one of them?"

Gord nodded resolutely. "Let's see about their precautions elsewhere. We can circle around to the left and work our way back here if possible. In the process we can take advantage of any weakness we find."

"Should we wait for full darkness?" the bard asked.

"That will come soon enough," Gord said, "and I am no more eager than those outlaws are to meet some night-prowling monster out after brigand or ore meat for a snack. You've more experience in woods such as these than I do, Gellor. What are we likely to meet?"

The bard looked at Gord with raised eyebrows. "The way you've been going, I was beginning to think that you were ranger as well as thief, acrobat, and swordsman," he said with mock surprise. "And doing well enough at it, too, I must say. No mockery at all, my friend. You are doing well. I am a bit more accustomed to court intrigue or battlefield than to such stuff as this, but I did roam a few forests in my younger days. This Vesve is unfamiliar to me, though. For all I know there could be bears and lions, or barghests and dragons, with everything in between tossed in for good measure. Still, from what I've seen so far, this place is most likely for were-swine and wild losels, with who knows what else."

"Big help," Gord said with a thin smile.

"Consult a sage next time," shot back Gellor immediately.

"Let's get moving," Gord said, seeing no useful direction in continuing the exchange, for both of them were tense and ready to quarrel uselessly. "It is dark enough here on the ground, and light enough above, to give us the advantage over those arboreal sentries."

Gellor nodded agreement, and the two began moving silently through the forest, circling the enemy encampment at a half-bowshot distance. At first they could move with relative speed, for the light from above made it possible to spot the losels with ease. Every other tree seemed to have a pair of the creatures roosting within its branches. After they had completed a quarter of the circuit of the outlaw bivouac, the last light failed, and then they moved more slowly.

"We are nearingthe path again," the bard said in a voice no louder than the rustle of some leaf disturbed by a mouse.

Gord could see the faint gleam of Gellor's enchanted ocular, and the young thief wondered how such vision compared with the power bestowed

upon his seeing by the cat's-eye ring he wore. Gord pointed just ahead, crouching low as he did so. The bard did likewise, almost before Gord sank low, for a body of humanoids was moving quietly down the trail, heading south - toward their camp!

Gellor began to slink toward the pathway, moving very fast but making almost no noise at all. This was from his early training in the craft of thievery, thought Gord as he emulated the bard's progress, only covering more distance than he did without any discernible sound at all. "I truly emulate him," thought Gord; thereafter, all of his senses were alert only for signs of enemies. There were perhaps a score of mixed humanoids ahead of them. The tall forms were certainly gnolls, the bulky ones probably were ores, and those that shambled were losels. All save the last group were armed with bows or crossbows. The humanoids could see fairly well in the night, for their eyes were sensitive to heat as well as normal light. The party was moving at a walk and traveling faster than either man could. Soon the humanoids would be out of sight.

"Time to become members of that raiding party!" Gellor hissed as he made for the path at a quickened pace.

"Hunch yourself and strut like a baboon. Perhaps they'll believe us to be losels guarding the rear," Gord murmured. Then they were onto the hard-packed ground of the track and swinging in a loping strut after the score of humanoids already out of sight.

There came no warning call from behind, and the two managed to close with the group ahead without difficulty. They had covered about half of the distance between the enemy camp and the place they had left Chert and his two charges. Something had to be done quickly.

"I'll use druidical spells," Gellor whispered as he hunched along beside his comrade. "This will cause confusion but little harm to these killers, so when I work the dweomers, be ready to do what you can to make them think that there is serious danger."

"I'll be ready!" Gord said, and then he loped closer to the pair of orcish crossbow-armed humanoids who brought up the rear of the column.

As he came near, one of them turned and grunted something to Gord that he couldn't understand. Not knowing whether it was the orcish tongue or just sounds, Gord grunted and waved his arm in the direction from which the humanoid band had come, bouncing as he did this. Uncertain, the man-ore who had turned to see who came stopped his march and so hid his mate.

Both peered backward to where a form could just be seen - that was Gellor. Gord knew, working at the casting of a spell to confound these creatures. At the sight of this, both humanoids brought up their already cocked weapons and prepared to shoot their bolts.

While the two were peering intently toward the direction of their own camp to find what their supposed losel comrade was warning them about, Gord was acting. He drew both of his recently acquired throwing knives and hurled them one after the other, with all his strength and skill, toward the retreating backs of the next humanoids in the column. This took but seconds. The two with crossbows thought he was simply gyrating in apish fashion, or thought nothing at all, intent as they were on aiming at their target. Even as his blades were hurtling toward the unsuspecting humanoids, the young thief grabbed one of the half-orcs and spun him. The stupid lout was facing southward before he knew what happened, and as his finger squeezed convulsively on the weapon's trigger he gave a shout of surprise. A gnoll turned quickly at that and took the buzzing bolt full in the eye.

Following this, with motion too rapid for the eye to discern, Gord threw himself down and struck the other man-ore's legs. The humanoid, already distracted, discharged his quarrel upward so that it whipped through leaves and twigs before burying itself harmlessly in a distant tree limb. The startled fellow never had the opportunity to know what had happened, for Cord's sword slew him in the next instant.

Suddenly there were screams from the head of the column, now about thirty or forty paces distant. In the interval between Gord and the main body several things were happening. The crossbow-wielding half-orc stood stupidly looking at the work he had done, for the wounded gnoll was writhing and screaming on the path. Gord's knives had done some damage as well, for another orcish humanoid was down, and the one who had walked beside him was bending over the injured one, removing a knife from where it protruded from the ore's shoulder.

One quick glance backward told him that Gellor was still at his spell-working. Gord unsheathed his dagger and set about his own labor, striking down the man-ore offhandedly in the process. The head of the column had evidently run into something very nasty and painful. Now they were turning in confusion at the cries and shouts from behind. Ducking low, the young thief darted ahead and stabbed at the pair of ores next in line. As he did so,

a tall, hyena-faced gnoll leaped into the melee, eager to kill whoever dared to assault his fellows. Gord shoved the ore who had taken a wound from his knife violently backward, meanwhile withdrawing his sword from the corpse of the other humanoid. Ore and gnoll collided, momentarily becoming entangled, and they separated and came for him. Gord met the rush but was brought down under the weight of the two humanoids. A moment later a losel leaped into the fray from a nearby tree limb, adding to the confusion that already existed.

Although he took a vicious bite on the leg, Gord could not be pinned down by weight or grip, as the attacking humanoids discovered to their immense chagrin. The young thief seemed to squirt from the heap of struggling bodies, stabbing with dagger and slashing wide shortsword as he came free. He sprang up, thrust both blades randomly into the mass before him, and then leaped and rolled to a position off the trail. Huge arrows from the bows of the infuriated gnoll archers sank into the three humanoids attempting to rise and follow their slippery adversary. In an instant these three already wounded creatures were done for, pierced by the shafts of their own fellows.

Almost a third of the enemy were accounted for, dead or wounded, and some certain harm had come to those at the head of the company. What more to do? Get away, thought Gord as he heard a loud commotion to the north and realized that the main camp was sending more troops to help die party under attack.

The young thief made a dash for escape, angling slightly toward the humanoid encampment but away from the pathway through the forest's heart. He kept very low and used every bit of brush and tree trunk to cover his movement. Quarrels and arrows whizzed through the woods, but they seemed to be released at random. After covering about fifty paces Gord halted and made a soft hooting noise, a prearranged recognition signal that he and his friends had agreed to when they entered the forest.

When no answering hoot came, but branches near the trail thrashed and bent, Gord moved quickly onward. Gellor would be able to fend for himself, and the losels, anyway, were still looking for those who had attacked their band. Much shouting and noise of running feet could be heard along the trail now, and Gord knew that a considerable reinforcement was coming up. The humanoids might still go on, and there was no need for silent attack any longer. Gord remembered the enspelled acorns that Curley

Greenleaf had given him long before, and dug the pair of nuts out of his pouch. Giving a silent prayer to Nature that the missiles would retain their power, he slung both in rapid succession toward the noise and crashing of brush that came from near the trail.

Gord remembered to shut his eyes and avert his gaze even as he whipped the second of the two acorns toward the chosen area. The first one burst before he could manage to shield his eyes. There was a flash that momentarily revealed a mass of humanoid shapes, a sheet of fire and screaming curses, then all was totally black. Gord's tightly shut eyelids had sparks and floating balls of light inside them, but his ears heard the second missile burst, followed by more cries and oaths. He fell flat on his belly and crawled as rapidly as he could, heading in the direction that he was sure was directly away from the enemy.

After a minute or two of worming his way, Gord halted and allowed his breathing to slow to its normal rate, then he willed it even lower and listened. His vision would be useless for some time yet, but his ears were functioning perfectly. There was a lot of noise behind him, so he gave a little sigh of relief. At least he had managed to do that right. What the young thief heard indicated that the humanoids now had officers who were setting about their work with precision and discipline. Orders were shouted, and responses made. Squads were beginning to beat the bushes; there were losels in the trees, and more climbing up from the sound of it. Gord surmised that the enemy encampment must have contained not a few score of humanoids, but hundreds! The attack on their scouting and raiding party had merely stirred them up. Well, no help for that, and at worst Chert and the lads with him would have a chance to get the hell out of the way of the swarm of enemies coming back along the trail.

Suddenly the order of the search was disrupted. There were sounds of terrible squeals and grunting, crashing of vegetation, and then the shouts and screams of the humanoids. They had evidently disturbed more than one wild boar, and the huge pigs were attacking savagely. Gord's exceptional vision was returning now, and he looked toward the commotion as he stood up and prepared to slip eastward and then head back south toward his own camp. Energy, glowing and crackling, was playing about the area. Now Gord cursed, for his special vision was again ruined for minutes, but his normal sight allowed him to judge that at least two magic-users were plying their arts against the ravening swine.

Time and more to be gone, no question. Gord gripped his enchanted shortsword tightly, allowing the power of the blade to surge upward. He could see just as humanoids and demi-humans saw now, a strange illumination of things warm and cold. It was inferior to the power of sight that his ring bestowed, but it was not clouded by the exposure to light from the magical missiles and bolts he had just seen. With this sight, he managed to escape the ongoing battle and slip southward without detection by the enemy.

Because he knew what to look for, Gord had no difficulty finding where his friends had gone. The original site they had chosen was deserted, of course, for Chert could not have failed to hear all the ruckus to the north and acted accordingly. The horses left a distinct trail if you knew that three had been in the place once. There were no droppings around, and a scent of nettles masked odors in the place. The tracks had been brushed, hurriedly but well enough. Gord grinned in admiration as he envisioned the flurry of activity that must have accompanied the process. The hoofmarks led eastward, winding between the massive trees, and then turned south to parallel the trail at two hundred or so yards. After a couple of minutes Gord could hear the faint sounds of hooves and men. He again gave the low hooting call, and this time there was a soft reply from ahead. Then another came from behind! Gord froze, pretending to be a tree. A soft footfall came, then the swishing sound of a disturbed bush. Another followed the tracks left . . . but was it friend or foe?

Gord heard a snuffling almost at the same time a repeated hoot came from ahead. "Shut up!" He sent this thought wildly in Chert's direction, even as he stared back toward the soft sniffing noise. He saw a losel bent close to the ground, traveling on all fours, while another of its unnatural kind followed closely. The second creature was alertly watching for any enemies as its fellow followed the scent. The challenge was to kill both before either could alert other humanoids nearby. The snuffling one was sure to detect his presence momentarily, so Gord had no time to plan. He simply acted and hoped.

Gathering himself without a sound, Gord sprang as if he were a two-legged cat. As he landed, he brought the point of his sword squarely down upon the crouching ape-ore. It sunk to the hilt into the creature's exposed back, but the young thief allowed himself no glance at the result. He was upon the second losel in the same motion that had enabled him to pierce the

first. This creature had turned its head to survey the surrounding area as the two sought their prey. Gord had sprung when he saw this, and the upright ape-ore had no time to utter a cry. His long poniard bit into the creature's throat even as it raised its short club and struck at the attacking human. The bludgeon stunned Gord, and the two antagonists fell together, the losel snapping and tearing at Gord with its dying ferocity, as the young man locked his fingers around the beast's throat and squeezed with all his might to prevent any utterance from its foul throat. The nails digging into his flesh ceased their pressure, and the losel's jaws opened in a gurgle of death.

Just as he was rising and turning to retrieve his blade from the back of the first of the ape-ores, Gord heard scrabbling and gasping sounds from the direction the losels had come. What damned enemy now came? He jerked the sword free and spun, ready to strike.

"Hold," a voice said softly. "I've just done for the third of those things, and I think that's all that followed." It was the bard's voice, and Gord relaxed.

"Chert and the rest are just ahead," Gord whispered to Gellor as his friend stepped into view from behind the screen of brush that had separated them. "I'll signal them that we're coming."

The bard grabbed Gord and made a shushing sound. "Don't do that!" he admonished. "I've heard the losels make a very similar call when they want their fellows to come. It seems we picked a poor sound for recognition," he added ruefully. The two men trotted as quickly as they could, calling Chert's name softly as they went. Fortunately, Chert had been creeping toward the muted noises of combat with the losels, and the barbarian heard and recognized his friends' calling immediately. Together, the three rejoined the two lads and led them deeper into the forest, going directly away from the humanoid pathway that ran through the Vesve's hidden interior. As they went they worked up the whistle of a nightbird as their new recognition call. They wanted no more problems there, for what they faced was sufficient without the addition of bringing losels to them.

"What happened?" Chert asked when they were safely away from any likelihood of discovery.

"Tell us, please;" begged Thatch and Shad. "Did you kill all of them?"

Gord chuckled regretfully. "I only wish we had," he said to his companions. "We managed to bring an end to a half-dozen of those filthy

ape-things, and a handful of other stinking humanoids as well, but there are hundreds left, I fear."

Gellor asked Gord several questions about his activity and then related his own work. He had used druidical power to cause the tree roots in the area to form a spiky bed mat had thrust up in the path of the party of marauders. That had been the cause of their consternation while Gord was attacking the rear of the party. The bard had then immediately begun a spell that was potent in the calling of wild things, especially fierce beasts and carnivores. He had had to work at it a long while, but its result was the summoning of a fair number of wild pigs to the scene. The swine, naturally, charged the humanoids, attacking without fear.

"Too bad there were dweomercrafters amongst the enemy ranks," Gord said. "Did you see the response to the boars' attacking? Magic flew thick and fast, I'll tell you. Even wild pigs deserve a better death than that meted out by those humanoids."

"Humanoids and worse," Gellor interjected. "I saw a bit of the display too, and those castings came from no orcish dabbler in the arcane arts. There was a powerful magic-worker there, and one or two lesser dweomercrafters, too."

The lads were listening with big eyes at this talk, but they remained quiet and showed expressions of determination despite all that had occurred. Shad asked in a small voice, "What are we going to do now?"

"Rest," Gellor said practically. "In the morning we'll see if we can't work out a plan that will succeed against so powerful a collection of enemies."

"We know one thing, at least " Chert said heavily.

"We do?" his young associate asked in surprise.

"Sure," the barbarian replied. "All those ores and losels and gnolls, and spell-casters too, means something certain, Gord. The Second Key must be with that collection of scum, or I'm a Medegian merchant's arse!"

Chapter 24

Night had fallen over the sprawling fastness of the Vesve Forest once again. The company of mixed humanoids pressed on in the darkness. The few humans within their ranks were allowed to march along the beaten path, with only occasional curses coming from them as they stumbled over tree roots and stepped upon one another in the blackness. Arboreal ores swarmed ahead in the treetops to make certain that no enemy lay in wait for the rest of the band. Fully three score had such duty, and woe to the one who lagged. Another twenty were strung out to either side, likewise brachiating as flank protection. In the center of the whole group were Obmi and his henchman Keak, well protected by tough humanoids and their powers, of course.

After the ambush and slaughter of so many of their rear scouts, Obmi had directed that the company of gnolls be placed under the command of a half-breed ore who had some small skill at spells of clerical sort and great ability with assassin's weapons. There was also another renegade elf, albeit not much of a spell-binder, now assisting Keak. Obmi saw to it that these two were in motion, up and down the line, frequently. Any further attack would be met with sharp retaliation. The loss of thirty of these scum didn't bother the dwarf a whit, but he disliked the reaction that Iuz would certainly have upon hearing the news. Obmi had reports from his outlaw woodsmen that there were no more than a half-dozen men involved in the attack upon his party. The fact that one or more of them was obviously a considerable foe was immaterial. Face had been lost by the dwarf, and with it came a lessening of Iuz's stature. Infinitesimal as this misfortune was, retribution would occur. Iuz's anger must fall somewhere. . . .

The outlaw group moved more swiftly now, marching mostly by night and resting during the day. This allowed them to keep a better watch for those who followed and harassed, and it kept the scum too tired to fight amongst themselves at every halt too. Obmi was pleased with the arrangement.

In the twenty-four hours since he had slain the wild boars and then driven off the attacking men, Obmi had covered as many miles. Should there actually be a larger force than the handful the stupid scouts reported as having caused the trouble, then these enemies would have to run to keep up. Moving a mass of troops through this sort of terrain was slow work, and the dwarf cursed the fact that he had but a few hundred under his command. If

he had thousands, he would not need to run as if chased by devils, while with only a score or two he could move much more swiftly. It almost seemed as if there was a plot to discomfit him. Had Obmi not understood the nature of the thing he carried to Iuz, he would, in fact, suspect the cambion of trying to be rid of him. At every turn in the path it seemed that another handful of humanoids joined his force, adding little to its real strength and slowing its progress disproportionately as they were fitted into the command in any hodgepodge fashion. Why couldn't he get some powerful spell-binders to augment this rag-tag regiment? With these, and a few ogres or trolls, he'd be able to get through the forest in speed and style!

"Rot your balls, Klabdul!" the dwarf shouted to the half-orc who rode near Keak. "Move your worthless butt ahead there and see what all that fuss is about - quick!" There was something happening in the trees ahead. Obmi's vision didn't extend that far, but the cries of the ape-ores and the noise told him that all was not well.

The half-orc priest went off immediately. Keak was giggling at the fear he'd seen in the fellow's ugly face. "Shut up, Keak! Stop that godsdamned cackling instantly!" roared Obmi.

The skinny elf snapped his mouth closed and looked at Obmi. "Master, as you wish," he intoned solemnly, then burst into a fresh torrent of high-pitched laughter.

"That's enough, you long-eared turd eater!" Obmi fumed. "You take your worthless elvish ass and get to the tail end of this gaggle of scum. If there's trouble ahead, it's probably a ruse. Any real attack will hit the rear. Be there and stop it if it comes, understand?"

"As if I'd thought of it myself, Lord Obmi," Keak called as he turned his horse and urged it along, yelling at hulking gnolls to clear a path for him or be castrated.

The column halted in confusion, and Obmi swore more loudly still. That must be Klabdul screwing around with the advance, the dwarf reckoned. There was no other reason, for the commotion in the trees had ceased, and no sounds of battle came from ahead. It was time to take a direct hand. Obmi got his mount moving, heading for the front of the confused band.

"What's the reason for this halt?" he demanded.

Klabdul materialized from behind a tree, an arboreal ape in tow. He bowed and said, "Pardon, lord, but I called it, for the losels had come down from the trees and were refusing to return."

"What? These miserable half-apes wouldn't dare such a thing! You there!" the dwarf said to the cowering creature held fast by the brutish priest-assassin. "Speak or die! Did you and your fellows do as this priest claims?"

Obmi spoke carefully in orcish, for these arboreal humanoids were more stupid than their cousins, if that was possible. Worse still, as simian as were the ores, these crossbreed ones were even more apelike, and their out-thrust jaws, baboonlike muzzles, and large canine teeth made their halting speech difficult to understand. Leave it to that perverted cambion to develop such a species as these so-called losels!

"Uh ... uh ... it killed Zhuf!" the ape-ore said, and it tried to grin to see if that would end the matter.

This was going to take a bit of time, Obmi realized. "What do you mean, 'it'? Tell me, what killed - "

"Zhuf!" the losel supplied.

"Bugger Zhuf!" the dwarf nearly screamed at the stupid creature. "What was it that killed him?"

"Duh . . . duh lion dat was in duh trees killed Zhuf, dat's what."

"Good!"

"Ain't good, Zhuf bein' chewed up like that," the losel countered, and then cringed when he saw Obmi point his hammer at him.

"Listen, you moronic mongrel," the dwarf spat without raising his voice. "Now, you tell me exactly what happened, and do it slowly and quickly. Otherwise, I will split your louse-ridden cranium, feed the small contents to those gnolls there, and ask another of your comrades to give me the information I require. You may begin now."

The losel couldn't understand half of what the terrible little dwarf said, but he understood the threat in Obmi's tone all too well. "Uh . . . wewuzgoin' 'longpretty easy-like. Nuttin'to see, no stuff to hurt us. Zhuf, he was duh furst ah us, so he's da one who sez, 'Lookout chums, dere's a lion!'

"Lions don't climb around in trees," Obmi interjected. "Did you actually see the animal?"

"Duh what?"

"The Hon! Go on with your report, you idiot!"

"Ah, sure ting, I seen da lion. It was a blackie, an' didn't have no mane. It was jes' sittin' an' lookin’ at us all. Den Zhuf, he flung his club al da lion

and tried to jump back in where we wuz. Dat's when it got a holt a him an' chewed up ol' Zhuf inna big bite!"

"What did the rest of you do?" demanded the dwarf.

"Shit! Waddya 'spect? We pitched our clubs at da friggin' cat real good. Me, I hit 'im right on da schnozzle. Couple ah da boys, dey had dem funny li'l bows ya give 'em. Whang! Whang! Dey lets loose, an' da sticks fly right into da bassard's side like, only dey don't sink in. Jes' like da clubs, da arrahs ain't doin' no hurt to da lion. . . ."

"So?"

"Dat big cat, he looks at us boys like we jus' patted his head. Den he opens his mout, all covered with Zhuf s blood, an' I saw da t'ing grin - scariest thing I ever seen! Den we got down from da trees, quick-like, an' none ah us goin' back 'til that cat's meat on da table!" Obmi struck the losel as hard as he could with the ensorcelled hammer. The blow sufficed to kill the stupid creature instantly, and it never knew what struck it. All the others were watching. He glared at these ape-ores from a visage filled with rage.

"There may or may not be some big cat - a leopard, probably - up there in the trees," he said threateningly. " But I am here; even you dimwitted monkeys can see that. I will certainly kill you all if you do not get back into those branches overhead and resume your work! You will move ahead, watch for enemies, and tell me if you see any. If there is a cat up there, you will slay it, or else I will have others do so. No matter. Now, get going!"

The losels bounded up into the branches quickly, and that was the end of it.

"Get going, the rest of you!" Obmi shouted. "You'll trot for the next hour to make up for the delay. Stragglers and laggards will be killed!"

A quarter of an hour passed, and then a new commotion occurred at the head of the company. The cause was the black leopard again, and this time Obmi had to use his hammer on two of the frightened arboreal ores before the rest could be forced back into the trees again. Now Obmi was certain that the creature was a were-cat of some sort. Knowing this, he called to the thin-faced elf to settle the matter.

"Keak, you are to take charge of the advance. Keep a close eye on what's going on above, for a were-leopard seems to be stalking the losels - bad taste in food habits, I'd say, but it is disrupting things inordinately. If the kitty shows its whiskers again, pluck them!"

Keak smiled at the prospect. "Any preference as to how I kill the thing?"

"Why should I care?"

The sticklike figure shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I thought you might like to have its hide for a saddle covering," Keak cackled, "but if it's no matter, I'll blast its balls off with a lightning bolt!"

"Bah! Just do it and be quiet."

When another disturbance came a half-hour later, Keak was there and ready. This Obmi knew, for a great flash and the sizzling crack of the stroke of blazing electricity gave clear evidence that the elven spell-caster had done just what he'd said. The dwarf smiled to himself and went ahead to view the body. A half-dozen charred losels were scattered on the ground, but there was no corpse of man nor body of cat.

"What occurred?" the dwarf asked with a calmness he did not feel.

Keak looked sick. "The bolt missed," he said through thin lips.

"These unfortunate apelings?" inquired Obmi mildly as he eyed the smoking remains of the losels.

"They were in the path of the stroke, or else in the tree, and took too much electricity and died," Keak replied with a wince as the dwarf stared unwinkingly at him. "That bastard cat is fast. Lord Obmi," the elven mage hastened to add. "It watched me stand near and begin my casting. Just as I loosed the stroke, it leaped away - vanished, possibly, I don't know. It is very smart and more than any were-beast I've ever seen, and you know I have slain my share!"

Obmi nodded at that and reslung his hammer. Keak did not make stupid errors like that without cause. Angry as he was, Obmi valued the elf too much to waste him for no purpose other than the satisfaction of frustrated ire. Too much, far too much, was at stake in this whole game for him to make foolish misjudgments or allow rage to blind him.

"See that the column is halted. Get sentries out. Make sure that we are as well protected as possible. When that's done, come back to me at once, dear Keak. You and I must work together on a plan to solve our problems."

The elf bowed and hurried off, relieved that Obmi bore him no malice for the failure. "Too bad," he mumbled to himself as he went. "Too bad the runt didn't have the balls to go after the black devil of a cat himself. Then he'd find out a thing or two. Hammer or no, that leopard would have a dwarf for dinner, and then I would be commander and bring the prize to Lord Iuz. What power I would have then. . . ." Continuing to mull over this pleasant reflection, the elven renegade went about his duties.

In the hours just preceding dawn, Obmi and Keak worked out a plan of action. As they huddled in conference, there were several more incidents, but after a scream and the following commotion, the black killer went elsewhere to strike again. It didn't matter. The cat-creature seemed unwilling to come near the center of the party, and that meant that it was most certainly vulnerable to spell and weapon - at least, those enchanted weapons wielded by Obmi, Keak, and a few others of the officers of the motley collection of humanoids.

"Let us summon Klabdul, Phlug, and the gnollish captain . . . Harhaff, then."

"The name is Harharaff, Lord." Keak corrected the dwarf politely, being careful not to giggle. "I'll bring them here at once."

"You're certain this will work?" Obmi asked again.

"I see no flaw, Lord Obmi."

"Get them, then. Hurry!"

Chapter 25

"Meeowww!" said Chert. Gord shot the hillman a dark scowl that threatened mayhem.

"It isn't funny, Chert. Stop it," the bard said, just managing to suppress a smile.

Gord looked at both men disdainfully. "What I managed was more than either or both of you could have done . . . besides, if you think it is a joke to creep through an encampment of towering humanoids as a little pussycat in order to overhear what's being said, you try it."

"We can't," the barbarian said with a broad grin of contentment. "As you yourself pointed out, only you can manage the trick!"

Thatch and his small companion, Shad, were sitting cross-legged nearby. They had listened solemnly to the tale of Gord's using the ring to take cat-form. They were frightened by were-creatures of any sort, the very thought making them shudder. Yet this man who told them about turning into a huge, black leopard and killing losels thereby was a friend - and losels were awful things, too! They could only listen and withhold judgment. It seemed there was a whole lot more to the world than Tusham village and being successful hunters! Both lads listened carefully, not only because the story was exciting and full of danger, but because they wanted some clue about the treasure. So far they had seen more of trouble with evil humanoids and the like than folk were ever expected to. The rewards must be really terrific for these men to go through all this sort of danger just to get the key. What would the dragon be like? Thatch looked at Shad, and Shad stared back for a moment. There was an unspoken exchange then, both boys wishing that they hadn't decided to set out into the forest as hunters quite so soon.

"That foul little dwarf is a wily one," Gellor said. "If he has done as he said, we must either separate or find a way to get rid of the gnolls quickly."

"Pardon, Master Gellor, but what are gnolls?" Thatch asked.

Chert answered before the bard could speak. "Nasty, dog-faced things as big as I am. They're mean killers, too, and would cheerfully roast you two over a fire."

"That, boys," Gellor added, "is no exaggeration, and they'd eat you too, after they were done. AH that as it is, we'll see to it that you never have to face any gnolls until you're able to deal with them on terms they find not to their liking."

"Like Master Gord did to the losels?" Shad said eagerly.

Gord was somber. "You'd not like that much, Shad. Gellor means that when you're grown fully, trained to fight properly, and have armor and all, you and Thatch there will be more than a match for a pair of gnolls."

The boys sat back, feeling bigger and more confident.

"What's to be done, then?" asked the bard, looking at Gord.

There had been a subtle change in roles, the young man noted. Over the time he had known Gellor, the one-eyed man had been many things to him - fatherlike, a mentor, a leader, a rescuer, and more. The shift had occurred subtly, all right, but it was distinct. Not only was Gellor now treating him as an equal, but at times the bard was deferring to Gord almost as if the young thief were a superior! This was a bit disturbing, but there was no time for pondering the matter now.

"We move ahead," said Gord, "and if we find the band of gnolls spread out in our path, you four turn back a ways and stay put. I'll get by them without difficulty, and catch up with Obmi and his filthy train of scum - they'll be deserting the damned dwarf now, not flocking to him. Somewhere along the trail, somehow, I will get the chance to kill that miserable dastard and gel the Second Key," the thief said vehemently. "I'm certain it is on his twisted body somewhere, and I'll tear him apart to find it."

"Let's get going," Chert said practically. "Listen now, my boys. Here's what you two are to do if we meet any of these half-human scum and there is no way for you to get away. Hold your spears before you, thus . . ." and he went on with his instructions as their small group headed for the hard-beaten pathway leading toward the north and the realm of the demoniac Iuz.

"They're ahead, all right," Chert muttered as he slipped back to join his friends. He had gone ahead on the path to see if Gord's recounting of the conversation overheard as a small, midnight-black tomcat had been correct. It was. Gord had said that Obmi had ordered the gnoll captain, a huge monster named Harharaff, to remain behind to prevent any enemy from following, while the remainder of the force went northward as before. Gord said that the gnoll leader had seemed almost relieved to be given such duty, for the fear of the predatory killer of losels was spreading from ores to gnolls.

Gord nodded. "This is where we part company, then."

"Maybe if I picked off a few of those flea-bag bastards, the rest would take off," Chert said halfheartedly.

"That would not serve, my friend, so why risk it?" Gellor said softly.

Gord shook the hands of the others - Chert, the bard, Thatch, and then little Shad. "You kill some for me!" the boy said earnestly, and they all laughed.

Without further ado, Gord left. He went on foot, carrying his weapons and little else. The forest would provide for him. When the dwarf had begun to move at night, they thought they had lost the game. Chert was unable to see to travel and fight in darkness, for he had no magical sight as did his adult comrades. The lads needed tending. Something had to be found to slow, if not halt, the humanoid band that surrounded and protected the dwarf and his prize. Then Gord had decided to experiment.

The Catlord had told him that the ring he wore conveyed the power of lycanthropy, and that Gord could assume cat-form at will. The other powers of the ring worked, and Gord had no reason to doubt the Master Cat's word about form change. It was one thing to play at being a cat, to call oneself "Blackcat" and be a cat-burglar. It was quite another to actually become a genuine leopard - or even a domestic cat. Gord had just never wished to be anything other than his human self. But desperate circumstances call for desperate measures. Without telling his companions, the young thief had slipped away and tried the power of the ring. It worked, of course. The transformation took only a minute, and it was only slightly painful. Everything he wore simply became part of his new form somehow - clothing and boots, weapons, everything.

Gord could see parts of his new body. He was a cat, a big leopard with inky coat and long tail. Gord-the-leopard had padded to a nearby pool and peered at his reflection in the water. He looked splendid, handsome! Green eyes, long whiskers, a long, pinkish-red tongue, and huge fangs of gleaming white. How nice it would be to eat some fresh meat, drink from the pool here, and then gaze at his reflection until sleep came. There was a broad, comfortable-looking limb nearby where he could rest, too.

Gord had had to jerk his mind back quickly. How easy it was to fall into the thinking of the form one had assumed - and what would happen if he allowed this to occur? Perhaps he would take animal form more and more, eventually living out his life as leopard, not man. Gord shuddered and willed himself back to his own shape. In a minute he was human again, clothed and equipped as before.

As he stood pondering this, Gord recalled the feeling of being a large, powerful cat. He wanted to go back to that form, try the feline muscles,

bound and spring, climb and hunt. To see and experience the world as a leopard was an interesting desire. Well, so was drinking alcohol, in a far different but similarly insidious way; and the vapors of herbs, fungi-eating, and extractions of certain other substances all had lures that ensnared some humans. Gord could resist these habits and addictions because he enjoyed life without them. He knew he must do the same with respect to this human-to-cat power he possessed. It must become a tool used only for purposes necessary to some cause, and used only when Gord must.

The others heard the news with excitement, not having any of the reservations that Gord did. When he told them of the strange feelings the change evoked within him, Gellor had shrugged them off and Chert had told him to enjoy. Upon reconsideration, he realized that druids and magic-users assumed many sorts of forms on a regular basis. Still, this wasn't lycanthropy, was it? Then Gellor had pointed out that the ring had a magical power, so strictly speaking there was no shape-shifting within Gord, and the whole was less lycanthropic than Curley's ability to become a hawk or a turtle for a brief time. Gord gave up his reservations.

He had stalked through the night, bounding along the forest floor, climbing trees and using branches as a roadway, slipping through places two-leggers would find impossible. It had been easy to move ahead of the mass of smelly, noisy humanoids and the gabbling ape-creatures who swung clumsily through the branches. It had been the simplest of things to catch and kill the first losel, for the stupid creature didn't know enough to flee from certain death. Had it been leopard slaying baboon or human slaying ore? No matter. When the clubs and small bolts had struck him, Gord-the-leopard felt only small thumps and fly-bites. Momentary fear for his safety gave way to feelings of invulnerability and triumph. Now he could singlehandedly slay the whole filthy tribe of two-leggers and get the prize. He had laughed full in the face of one gaping losel, causing it to leap groundward, chattering in fear.

Reason returned when he saw a stick-thin elfin robes that bespoke magic staring upward at him sometime later. Cat-contempt for so puny a creature caused him to stare haughtily down as the puny thing began muttering softly and waving his arms. Gord's ears heard every sound the creature made, and then the human part of Gord's mind panicked, and the cat portion reacted by leaping away.

Just in time, that great spring. It carried him across some thirty feet to another tree limb slightly below the one he'd been upon, and along it to another, all in a second. Behind his black-furred tail there was a flash and sizzle of energy, as a lightning stroke hit the spot where his graceful form had lain only a second ago, and losels screamed and fell like ripe fruit from the struck tree. Thereafter Gord made an effort, and the human mind always controlled the leopard brain.

Gord pondered, briefly, the dichotomy of thinking. Of course! The power of shapechanging would be useless if the ability to properly utilize the new form were missing. Simplicity itself. The trick was to keep the real mind in power while allowing the new one to handle the body as it was designed to control. Human mind directs, cat mind operates. Easy to visualize, difficult in the extreme to accomplish. Too much direction, and the cat brain was overridden. Then the leopard body became clumsy and unable to perform its natural functioning. On the other hand, too little monitoring, too much freedom, and the cat took over the human portion, submerging it to little more than a vague memory or relegating it to a sort of conscience that could do little but scold or praise. It took an hour, but eventually Gord managed to get the correct balance.

By men the company of humanoids had been halted, a perimeter ringed with guards, and alert leaders stationed where they could protect the center of the encampment. Gord-the-leopard managed to harass the ape-ores, but the exercise was useless. When he saw the leaders of the company gathering to hold some sort of council, he acted at once.

If he could assume leopard form so easily, why not that of a small domestic cat? Springing to the ground, Gord concentrated on shifting from leopard to torn, and in the usual time he was as he wished - a rather large one, but a tomcat nevertheless. In this form he had crept through the camp to where he could hear the words of the group gathered. Gord-the-cat arrived just at the conclusion of the meeting. He heard the dwarf tell the huge, heavily armored gnoll who stood respectfully there that he was to block the path. At least that's what it seemed to be, for Gord had scant proficiency with the bastard tongue of ores and gnolls and the rest of the humanoid species.

The gnoll chief was reluctant and argued. Obmi insisted, telling him that only a weak force could be expected - something like "few, soft men who you will kill and loot" were more like the exact terms the dwarf used. He

clinched the whole by mentioning that the cat-devil would follow Obmi and the losels. Then gnoll had grinned hideously in agreement and gone off.

"The scouting group will ride well in advance tomorrow morning," the gaunt elf called Keak had said with a cackle.

"Yes, that is so," the dwarf replied, and then Obmi smiled for the first time since Gord-the-cat had been watching, crouched in the shadows beneath a low shrub.

"Klabdul," Keak had said with a friendly arm around the half-orc's wide shoulders, "you must come into our tent to get special instructions about your role as chief of the scouting force!"

The half-breed's ugly face had shown delight at such a display of favor. With Obmi suggesting a bit of wine as they talked, the three had stepped into the tent shared by the elf and dwarf. A ring of guards surrounded it, so there was no way for Gord to get close enough to hear more. Belly brushing the ground, he had slunk from the encampment, shifting into leopard form, and loped to the place where his friends waited. The whole story fascinated them, and then they had checked to see if Gord's interpretation of the conversation had been correct. The presence of over half a hundred of the hyena-faced humanoids was ample confirmation. The gnolls prevented further pursuit by all but Gord, for even if the others managed to slip around the widely spread humanoid band, they could well be caught between gnolls and the main body later. Even with Gord's work, there were several hundred still in the main party. If losels and ores deserted in numbers, a hundred men and ores were still too many when backed by the tough dwarf and the spell-caster, Keak. Gord's friends would have to remain behind, for only he could now hope to accomplish the mission.

Gord was still uneasy about changing from man to cat - bashful or ashamed, he wasn't sure which. After the farewell, the young thief moved eastward into the forest, swinging wide to the right-hand side of the pathway. Moving as quietly as any woodsman, Gord made certain that he was several hundred yards off the trail and well away from the observation of his companions; then he allowed the transformation to occur. In a minute a huge black panther stretched itself. The cat yawned almost lazily, flexed its claws, stretched, and then moved like a bolt from an arbelast into the trees.

Seconds later several gnolls moved into the small area left clear by a falling tree. They peered around carefully, their bows and axelike bardiches

at the ready, but there was nothing threatening there. One asked another if he had seen something black a moment before. The other grunted a noncommittal reply. The humanoids went on with their scouting, looking for humans to kill.

It was an easy manner to travel as a leopard through the old trees of the Vesve. The ground below was perfect for running, while the thick, interlocking branches above made a highway for a big cat to walk upon. Gord-the-panther - and he now simply thought of both human and animal forms as Gord - elected to stay on the leaf-matted forest floor until he approached the main body of Obmi's band. His panther's sense of smell would give him all the warning he needed when he was near. He allowed his human mind to ride that of the cat, so that the feline part received and sorted out sensory information while the human part gave it identifiers that related to human experience. Odors were the difficult part.

Several times during the next few hours Gord had to scramble madly up a nearby tree in order to avoid other dangerous creatures not accustomed to having a panther intrude on their domain. Not being certain that his immunity to weapons extended to the tusks of a boar or the jaws of a savage brown bear, Gord took flight as the wiser course. He could not run for long periods, but there were many areas where he could safely rest. Luck seemed to ride with him too. He had caught one of the giant squirrels busy eating fungi, made a fast (and delicious) meal of it, and was taking a catnap in the leafy crotch of a galda tree when a dozen bugbears padded past as quietly as great cats.

These giant goblins were heading west and seemed to be no part of the humanoid party still several miles ahead. Gord watched through glowing, green panther eyes as the humanoids passed, and the bugbears never realized he was there. Could these big goblins have actually hurt him? Gord wasn't interested in finding out unless he had to. Another time he was taking a drink from a stream when his feline mind seemed uneasy, so Gord allowed it to have its way without seeking to interpret the cause of the tension. The panther jumped and spat, just avoiding the strike of a huge adder that was lurking at the bank of the watercourse, waiting for unwary prey.

It took the whole day for him to catch up with the collection of humanoids and renegade humans traveling toward the realm of Iuz. The company had halted to rest and forage for food. Gord restrained the cat-urge

to attack the losels he saw. He went wide around them and ahead of the humanoids again. No attacks this time, he reasoned. He would see if the dwarf could be lulled into a sense of security and safety, then he would strike.

Then an idea came to him that satisfied both man and panther. He lay in wait and eventually saw a man venture forth to answer the call of nature. Gord wondered why he would go so far from his fellows so close to dark. The brigand drew out a large flask and swigged great gulps of its contents. That explained that. He was a lone drinker who did not care to share his liquor with his associates.

The panther leaped upon the unsuspecting outlaw and tore out his throat before the fellow knew he had been attacked. Gord was appalled at his desire to strike thus, and the panther mind was repulsed at the reek of alcohol and the foul stench of the man. They compromised. Panther carried corpse into a tree and hid it, and man assumed the guise of brigand, using the fellow's cloak as a disguise.

As he returned to his own form it suddenly occurred to Gord that the shape-shift ing was no longer a dreaded thing. The day of integration between cat and man had been beneficial. It made him realize that he had thought in cat-fashion, or as close as a human could come to thinking thus, as long as he could remember. Certainly, when he walked slender lines, balanced on roof ridges, and ran along eaves he was feline, just as his burglar appellation, Blackcat, attested. He could now shift from man to cat and back without hesitation or reservation. There was no sense of ill or unnaturalness in so doing. This made Gord glad, for he had no choice in the matter anyway.

As Gord walked into the encampment, he was surprised at the disordered nature of affairs. When he had spied upon it previously, the dwarven leader had kept order and discipline. But this time Obmi had allowed things to slip. The place was in chaos.

"Whazzup, pal?" a drunken bandit asked as he staggered past Gord to relieve himself against a nearby tree.

"Ah . . . nothin', pal. . . . Got any sauce?"

The fellow leered at Gord, patted a half-full skin slung around his shoulder, and slurred, "Yep, but I ain't sharin' it unless ya got some ta split with yer ol' pal!" And he emphasized just who the "ol’ pal" was by striking

himself hard enough on the chest to send himself stumbling backward a couple of steps.

"Say, I don't rec'nizeya. . . . Waz yer name, anyway?" he said, then laughed at his own joke. "Ya get it? Anyway!" He reeled and laughed more. "I sure wish I could get some, an' I'll take it anyway. Arr, har, har!"

"What?" asked the young thief, confused.

"Who gives a pinch o' coon-crap anyway, Anyway? I be Tick, an' damned happy to meet a man who's got balls enough to admit he'll get it anyway. What outfit ya with, Anyway?"

Gord relaxed. This sot was so stupid with booze that he had asked a question and interpreted it as Gord's name. The dolt was calling him "Anyway" thinking it was his name. . . . Gord realized that this very drunken fellow was his ticket into the camp without questions being asked. Gord handed him the flask he had taken from his earlier victim, watching to see if the brigand called Tick would recognize it. Tick merely took it and swilled brandy.

"Grea' stuff! Both Galley and Pegger got bottles, too. . . . Hey, ya seen ol' Pegger 'round here? He wen' out to take a dump, an I'll bet the wild hogs ate 'im. Ahar, har, arrh!"

"Nah, I ain't seen neither of them," Gord said. "How come the camp is so relaxed tonight? Yesterday it was all that spit-and-polish bit, and now old Obmi's let up on us. You know why?"

Tick puzzled over that a moment, helping himself to think by taking another pull from the flask of fiery liquor. "That buggerin' li'l dwarf is a mean un, an' who can tell what's goin' through that dirty dwarf mind he's got. Yesserday he wuz a jabberin' and cursin' and bossin' us about all the time. Today he jes' sits on his horse and don't talk at all, an' now he's holed up in his fancy-assed tent and lettin' us have some fun for a change. . . . Hey, what's yer outfit again?"

"Loner - just came in and signed up with that skinny elf called Keak."

"Thass funny, I don' recall any loners bein' taken on. . . ."

Gord put his arm around Tick's shoulders. "Come on, old pal! Let's go and see if maybe Keak can explain it to you."

The outlaw jerked away as if Gord were a leper. "You full of crap, boy! I ain't goin' nowhere near that crazy li'l elf bastard. He's yer boss, you go an' talk to "im," Drawing himself up with as much dignity as he could muster, the drunken brigand staggered away, anxious to find better company. Gord

let him go. Before he'd gone adozen steps, however, Tick turned and came back.

"Wait a sec, chum! Keak rode off this mornin' with that creepy half-orc priest! Whattin hell ya sayin'?"

Trouble! Drunk as he was, the outlaw was suspicious and not about to let this statement pass as he had the rest. Gord thought fast. "Damn, Tick, yer right! That brandy is potent stuff - want another swig?"

Suspicious or not, Tick couldn't pass that up. "Okay, an' then you an' me better see Cap'n Sawtooth an' get things strai - "

Gord hit him solidly over the head with the pommel of his dagger, and the brigand collapsed without a sound. The brandy spilled out over him, and Gord let him lay where he was. Passed out in drunken stupor from all appearances, Tick would sleep for hours. Gord doubted anyone in the camp would be interested. There was already sufficient commotion to awaken the dead. Singing and shouting, arguing and fighting, and all the rest of the things typical of a disorganized collection of brigands and humanoids, met for a rollicking good time. Something was certainly wrong!

Gord approached the command tent. A motley collection of men and humanoids surrounded it at a distance of about ten paces. A bugbear challenged him in barely intelligible Common speech.

"Get yer ass outta here, man! Not even a dog passes here!"

Putting on his most ferocious scowl, Gord faced the humanoid thing, glaring a challenge up at the towering form. "Yer ass, hairy! Cap'n Sawtooth sent me with a message for Obmi, personal-like."

"Gimme the message, and I'll pass it on," the bugbear said with a truculent sneer.

"Crap too, dumb-ass. Ya think the cap'n wants a big jerk like you knowing important information for the boss?"

"Yah, ya smart-mouthed little man? Izzat so? How come he let you know it if it's so damn important?"

Gord put on an expression of mixed relief and chagrin. "Okay, big guy, so you ain't so stupid as you look. . . . Now I know why they put you on guard duty here," he added as if amazed that he had to admit being outwitted by the giant goblin. "I guess you can keep a secret."

"Bet yer fat human ass I can," the guard snapped back.

"Well, you got it now. Here goes - only lean close so's all the camp don't hear it." The bugbear did, keeping a wary eye upon Gord as he did so.

"Cap'n Sawtooth says that Obmi should come quick. That bastard of a black panther is over by our position, but it don't know we spotted it. Sawtooth, he thinks it's waiting 'til things quiet down before it starts eatin' us again. . . ."

"Floggin! Foogish!" the bugbear exclaimed, referring to some god the giant goblins worshiped casually and swore by often. "Ya am'l shittin' me, are you?"

"I don't want my head bashed in! Who'd kid about that sort of stuff?"

"Right, buddy. You go in and tell Lord Obmi!"

Gord demurred. "No way! You said you would if I told you the message!"

The bugbear straightened to his full seven and a quarter feet and sneered. "Tough turds, hairless. Your cap'n sent you, and I'm passin' you through the line. Tell the dwarf yourself!"

Gord stumped past without a word, making it appear that he truly believed he was going to his own execution. The bugbear gave a snarling chuckle behind him and returned to his task of standing and looking bored.

When he got to the entrance of the small tent, Gord coughed and said, "Message for Lord Obmi from Cap'n Sawtooth."

"Enter," a voice said. Gord went inside, not having to feign nervousness. There he saw Obmi, seated in a dwarf-sized chair, gnawing at a haunch of some sort of meat and drinking wine. The dwarf looked up and asked him what his message was. The voice was wrong. As a beggar, thief, and confidence man himself, Gord knew this wasn't the real Lord Obmi. It looked like the dwarf, but the voice had a slightly different timbre, and the mannerisms were wrong. He was an impostor!

Gord cleared his throat and replied, "It's the big, black leopard, Lord Obmi. Cap'n Sawtooth seen it near our position. . . ."

The dwarf swallowed a mouthful of meat and washed it down with wine. "So? Get back to Sawtooth and tell him I said to take care of it himself. Don't bother me again!"

"Yessir! But . . ."

"But what?" the dwarf asked with annoyance. "I told you to get out of here!"

"Yessir, only Sawtooth wanted me to show you this ring he found when the panther was nearby - it's a great lookin' cat's-eye stone in it too," Gord concluded ingenuously, holding out his ring toward the seated dwarf.

"Hand it to me then, you churl, and clear out." As he said this, the Obmi-impostor half rose and stretched out his hand for the glittering gold ring that Gord cupped in his left palm. Gord struck then.

His needle-pointed dagger was in his right hand before the dwarf knew what was happening. Cord's arm flashed up and punched out with a force sufficient to penetrate even enchanted steel armor, for the blade had power over metal. The poniard pierced the plate protecting the dwarfs body as if it were leather. The false Obmi screamed in pain as the point bit through his shoulder and toward his heart.

"To me!" the dwarf managed to croak, loud enough to be heard by the sharp-eared bugbear guard. The giant goblin immediately rushed toward the tent entrance, calling for his fellows to follow as he did so.

Gord stabbed the impostor again as the dwarf tried to stand. Then, desperately jamming the proffered ring back on his finger, the young adventurer pulled out his sword. The hulking bugbear burst into the tent at that very moment, nearly pulling the structure down in his rush to be inside and aid his leader.

"Graargg!" The humanoid screamed his war-cry as he came. Swinging a huge morning star in the confines of the tent was a problem the bugbear hadn't considered, however. He swung the massive, spike-headed club up to strike Gord, and the sharp projections pierced the canvas and immediately became entangled in it. As the startled bugbear brought club and tent down, Gord thrust his sword and dagger both into the creature's exposed chest and belly. The folds of falling canvas blinded the giant goblin, even as he let go of its morning star and clutched at his wounds. Two more quick thrusts made certain that the creature would never recover from his condition.

Dropping to his hands and knees, Gord heaved open the small chest that served as the dwarfs table. If the Second Key was anywhere in the tent, it was in this coffer! The canvas had fallen all the way down, and the lantern that had illuminated the place had been knocked down and broken in the struggle. Flames were licking the oiled cloth now, and in a moment the whole thing would go up in a roaring blaze. Outside, several of the other guards were trying vainly to find a way inside the collapsed tent, while others of their number were shouting an alarm to the rest of the camp.

Gord's searching fingers found bottles, cloth, and a leather bag. It was unlikely, but the pouch might be something. He thrust that into his belt even

as he slashed at the tent cloth nearest him and concentrated immediately on changing his form.

"Lord Obmi! Lord Obmi!" a man cried, poking at the fallen canvas as he did so. One corner of the tent was now blazing. Spears lifted the other end to allow the dwarf to escape ... if he could. Half the canvas was burning now, and the brigands were moving back, driven off by the heat.

As spears and pole arms lifted what remained of the tent, one of the humanoids crouched down and crawled forward to rescue the dwarf. A snarling black leopard tore half of the man-ore's face away with a swipe of its claws. Then the big cat was in the midst of the rest, a whirlwind of clawing biting fury.

"Save your ass!" an outlaw shouted as he dropped the glaive he had been holding and ran away in terror. The others with him weren't so lucky. Gord bit an ore on the leg, disabling him, then leaped upon a bugbear, tearing the humanoid with claws and teeth as he tried to pull his attacker off with his huge, hairy hands. A spear-thrust grazed harmlessly off Cord's flank, and the deflected point went downward into the bugbear's thigh. The goblin giant fell, and Gord immediately left off his attack on the creature in favor of another victim. He sprang full into the midst of a group of men and ores, knowing instinctively that any attack on him from a distance would be virtually impossible while he was surrounded by the brigands.

Amid the screams and shouts and wildly flailing weapons, Gord-the-leopard exacted a terrible toll. He didn't try to kill any one of the outlaws or humanoids, only to wound them with fang and claw. Their blows went unnoticed, and he gradually gave his human mind over to blood-lust and the urge to bring vengeance upon these malicious killers. Suddenly the press melted away, and he was standing amid a circle of fallen foes. A little distance away three foemen still held their ground. In fact, they were advancing cautiously toward him! This was too good to be true. Gord crouched, bunching his steely muscles to spring upon these foolish ones. Then his human mind registered a fact that enabled him to override feline fury. These opponents were bearing wicked-looking weapons and ready to take his charge on the gleaming tip of spear, sword, and scimitar. Magic weapons!

Instead of leaping ahead onto the waiting blades, Gord sprang sideways. A bolt caught his hind leg nonetheless. It barely grazed his ebony coat, but the path it left burned, and he let out a startled yowl of pain as he landed

and bounded off again. There was a shout of triumph from whoever had loosed the enchanted missile and wounded him, while the other three - a renegade human, a half-orc, and a particularly big bugbear - cursed and ran after him.

Gord ran flat out for the safety of the nearby forest, not caring to find out just how magical the weapons threatening him were. The spear the giant goblin waved whistled overhead and buried itself in the ground just a few feet in front of him. On an impulse Gord managed to bring himself to a sudden stop. "Having four legs is a real advantage at such times!" his human mind thought even as his cat one was causing his massive jaws to clamp fast on the quivering spearshaft. Then he was running again, bounding between the giant trees. The ragtag brigands howled after the escaping were-leopard, with the bugbear whose enchanted spear had been just stolen yelling the loudest of all.

Safe in a tree, pacing along the upper world of the forest, Gord-panther decided it was high time to rest and assess the situation. Only a few of the bravest of the band had dared to follow the three leaders into the woods in pursuit of the fleeing leopard. Gord had easily evaded the chase, climbing a tree and then moving swiftly from limb to limb. After a few minutes the humans and humanoids had ceased their halloo and returned to their encampment. Gord still held the enchanted spear fast in his leopard teeth. He realized that biting on the shaft made his teeth ache, and he spat it out on the broad limb he rested on. There were no indentations in the wood from his fangs. It was a potent weapon indeed!

The collection of bandits and humanoids would be breaking up even now, Gord thought. Without knowing that they had been deserted by their leader, they would think the body of the dwarf in the burned tent was their master. Without either Keak or Obmi to keep them in line, natural hostilities, bullying, and differences would send the motley assembly into separate bands immediately. The losels would certainly remain intact as a group. They would probably seek to inform their ultimate master, Iuz, of what had happened. The men would split from the ores, and the few other sorts of humanoids - bugbears, gnolls, and an odd norker or xvart - would side with one or another of these parties, according to where they thought they'd be least likely to be killed. Tomorrow morning there would be nothing left save the litter and refuse the brigands left behind.

All of the groups would avoid going in the direction of the tribal lands of gnolls left behind to the south. These humanoids would only kill or enslave men or ores who came their way. There being no need to have more concern for the safety of his comrades and the two boys with Gellor and Chert, Gord pondered the problem of the Obmi-impostor's and Keak's absence from the encampment. The answer was not long in coming. Once again the dwarf had callously abandoned his company to whatever fate held in store for them. He and Keak must have simply ridden on, leaving the rest to bear the brunt of things.

Very well, then. Obmi was a day ahead, but he surely had the Second Key with him. To make certain, Gord shifted to his own shape long enough to check out the leather poke. It held an assortment of coins equal to about a gold piece in value. The impostor had died for that sum, nothing more, for these creatures of Evil certainly had no loyalties. Resuming panther form, Gord again took the captured spear in his mouth and headed northward.

Chapter 26

"They come this way," Chert said.

Gellor nodded grimly. "Then it is time we showed this pack of yapping jackals what it is like to face men."

The barbarian had gone to spy on the gnolls blocking the route north. Although they had moved their own camp several miles southward, and well off the trail, the two men still felt uneasy, so Chert had volunteered to scout the enemy. If they had not had the two lads with them, Gellor and the woodland-raised barbarian would have simply slipped away until the humanoid tribe had wandered off elsewhere. Thatch and Shadow were village-bred. They had some skill at woodcraft, but certainly it was insufficient for what was demanded now. This put the two adventurers in a quandary.

"I can set a deadfall or two," Chert said.

"Good. I'll use a bit of druidical power to prepare some surprises, too. Chert, be ready with your bow," the one-eyed bard said. "I want you to feather as many of those hyena-heads as you can, and don't spare the shafts!"

Chert looked shocked. "Shoot away all the arrows? That will leave us with no defenses save spear and sword!"

"There you are wrong, my friend," Gellor said with a meaningful smile. "You see, the little snares I'll place to discomfit the enemy are just an annoyance. I have a far warmer welcome planned for that dreadful band of murdering humanoids."

The bard began explaining his plan, Chert nodding and occasionally adding some detail or asking a question. As Gellor concluded his exposition, the massive barbarian was grinning and slapping his thigh. "That will indeed do for them, but what about the lads?"

The one-eyed man ceased his smiling. "There's no help for that. We'll have to use them in the initial stage - for show only, I hope, and I'll give them what aid I can even for that."

Chert agreed that it was the best hope they had. Staying put was out of the question, abandoning the lads was unthinkable, and there was no way of avoiding the gnolls when the two boys were along. They had to bring the fight to the humanoids, and that fight had to go in their favor! Gellor called the two boys over and gave them a brief outline of what was to be done.

"Now you two stay put here. Be ready with your weapons, for we'll be back to get you soon enough, and then you're going to help us fox those man-eaters for sure, right?"

"Right!" Thatch and Shad cried in unison.

"Now both of you paint yourselves with that green and brown paste I made up. Put it wherever your skin shows, and help each other! I want you two to look as fierce and savage as any wild woods-roamer does!"

Smiling and laughing at the prospect, the lads hurried to comply. It was like a game to them, for they didn't fully understand the full nature of the whole matter. The men turned away and went into the forest to set the stage.

The heavy log fell suddenly, and the gnoll beneath it was dead in that instant, his neck broken. His fellows snarled in shock, froze, and peered here and there. One barked a syllable or two, pointing ahead on the trail. There was another trap there. Their teeth bared in feral attitude, the nine remaining humanoids moved off the path, to the right and left, stalking ahead in search of the men who dared to do this to one of their number.

Bowed limbs sprung upward with heavy, swishing sounds, and another pair of gnolls were caught in traps. These were not so effective, though. Each of these victims was simply suspended by one of his legs, nooses holding them dangling a few feet above the ground. With rude comments and laughs, another pair of their comrades went to cut them down. Both would-be liberators were struck by clothyard shafts as they attempted to cut the snares free. As the wounded humanoids fell, their companions took cover, their own bows and arrows ready to return the compliment.

A sudden, piercing shriek sounded to the gnolls' right, and ahead there was motion in the foliage. They loosed several shafts at the unseen enemy, and in return one of the humanoids was struck by a pair of arrows that killed him on the spot. Several of the gnolls started to advance, moving carefully from tree to tree; then another gave a startled bark as it was jerked suddenly into the air by a snare. This humanoid had been caught about its neck, however, and the cry was instantly choked off as the cord broke its neck. When humans armed with spears and painted in savage camouflage were seen moving toward them, darting from tree to tree, the five un-wounded gnolls ran back up the trail, leaving their pair of wounded comrades to their fate.

"Where is the second one?" Gellor hissed.

Chert, wiping his axe clean on the ragged cape worn by one of the gnolls, shrugged. "He should be near to your location - that's where he fell when my broad arrow took him," the barbarian replied in a low voice as he jerked the arrow free from the corpse at his feet. Then the giant hillman dashed across the hard-packed trail and joined his comrade in the brush on the other side of the pathway.

"This looks like a splash of blood," the bard said as Chert came up. "He must be heading toward the lads!"

"Hurry! We can - " and a snarling cry interrupted the barbarian in mid-sentence. Chert and Gellor ran toward the sound as fast as they could. Shrill shouts answered the initial cry. Then there was a terrible sound, an ascending laugh consisting of barking coughs, suddenly halted midway in its rise toward the high-pitched whining giggle typical of gnoll war-cries. Both men were certain of what they'd find, and Chert regretted ever having allowed the poor boys to accompany them into the Vesve on this deadly quest.

"I'll flay that mangy hide off the dog-faced bastard while he yet breathes!" Chert vowed as they came to the place where Shad and Thatch were to remain after showing themselves briefly to the gnolls.

Gellor was ashen-faced. "It's my fault. I should never have used boys to do men's work!"

"What do you mean, boys?" a shrill voice challenged. "Thatch and I are warriors!"

There beside the path stood the two lads. Shadow seemed to be nursing a broken arm, and he looked pale, while his bigger comrade was bleeding from a long gash across his chest. At their feet was the wounded gnoll, a bastard sword still clutched in his dead hand, and two boar-spears buried in abdomen and neck,

"Damned if you aren't warriors!" exclaimed Chert proudly.

"Let me see those wounds," the bard said more practically and with real concern. "There's going to be a lot more happening very soon, and you two are going to have to be in shape to run as fast as you can!"

"No," Shadow said sternly, if weakly. "Thatch and I aren't running from enemies ever again!"

The young barbarian laughed at this assertion. "Let me-tell you one thing, boys - warriors. You'll run plenty after this, and often enough too, unless I

don't know anything about battle. I've done it many a time in the past, and I expect to do it soon again - who wants to die uselessly?"

Thatch and Shad looked surprised at that. "You've run from enemies?" Thatch asked with disbelief and scorn.

"Yes!" Gellor interjected. "So have I, so has every soldier who was faced with a situation where dying would do no good for his cause. It has been called retreat, or a retrograde movement, but in truth it is running away to be able to fight another day. Now hold still while Chert and I tend those injuries. We have only a few minutes!"

The one-eyed bard employed arts of druidical healing to set and mend the broken arm, for Shad's forearm had been fractured by a chance hit from the gnoll just before he died. Luckily the flat of the blade had been involved; otherwise, Gellor had told the groaning lad sternly, his arm would have been severed. Shad was less eager to be a warrior after that.

"You're going to be well soon enough, although I can't get that broken bone mended as quickly as I'd like," Gellor told the lad when he had finished his ministrations. "Keep that sling on, and don't move your arm. Even with my spells of healing, it will take a few days for the bones to knit together and all the internal damage to be set right. Don't fret, though," he added hastily as he noted the worried expression on Shadow's thin face. "You'll be right as rain soon enough."

Chert, meanwhile, had cleaned up the long cut that crossed the upper part of Thatch's boyish chest. The barbarian had made a compress of herbs that stung, for Thatch had let out a cry of pain when the stuff was placed there. "Silence, warrior!" Chert had ordered with a stony face. "In my clan, such an outcry would bring disgrace until a brave deed expunged the shame of making noises at such little hurts as that!"

Thatch was still shamefaced when Gellor came over and examined the wound. The cut wasn't very deep, and Chert had cleaned and cared for it well. Without druidical art, the next step the barbarian would have taken was to sew the wound closed with bone needle and sinew. Fortunately for the lad, the bard was able to bring the parted flesh and skin together in a reddish seam without benefit of such painful process. Chert pretended to shake his head in scorn, calling such means of healing "soft." Thatch did not complain at all.

"Almost as good as new," Gellor told him quietly after touching the wound one last time. "In later years girls will admire the scar, and you'll

undoubtedly tell them awful lies about how you gained such a warrior's badge, but let that be as it may. . . ."

He spoke to both of the lads then. "Up and on your way, both of you fledgling warriors. As veterans of battle, you both know that neither of you can help Chert and me now, for worrying about wounded comrades is a hindrance! Thatch, help Shad by carrying part of his gear - he'll want that spear of his in hand, but he mustn't tote anything more along, for his wound is more severe than yours. Head back to the south as fast as you can. Stay off the path, keep together, and be quiet. Understand?"

When both of the boys nodded solemnly, Gellor added, "Fine. When you've gone not less than a league, find a safe place to hide out. We will come back for you as soon as we can - and we will be back, remember that! Off with you now, lads, and luck be with you."

Thatch and Shadow bobbed their heads and left without a word. Gellor smiled at that, and Chert gave a small chuckle. The two were certainly growing into men, and veteran fighters too, from all this. The massive hillman looked at his friend and asked, "What can I do in this next part?"

"Stay close to me, and keep any enemy at a distance. My spell should do the rest."

Both men were carefully concealed within a few minutes of the boys' departure. The bard had little piles of oak leaves, mistletoe, and holly berries before him. Chert had his great longbow strung and a full quiver of arrows on his hip, while a half-dozen extras were thrust into the ground ready for easy seizure and nocking. They didn't have long to wait.

The hunting pack of humanoids came through the trees with terrible rapidity. They were nearly silent as they trotted along, with only occasional shrill yapping sounds that served for both command and force alignment. A dozen of the gnolls went along the path, while a score flanked them to either hand. Nearly half carried bows, while the remainder had a motley assortment of arms, but all these weapons were terrible - two-handed swords, huge morning stars, glaive-guisarmes, and similar pole arms. Many also had heavy throwing spears in addition to their other weapons, while those carrying the seven-foot bows had axes or broadswords for close combat thrust into their belts.

"At least their master armed them well enough before throwing them to their fate," Chert whispered to the bard when he saw the weapons.

Gellor replied, "That'll do them no good, you'll see. Lively, now! Loose those shafts of yours!"

Chert began drawing and releasing as rapidly and with as much care as the situation allowed. His thickly muscled arms tensed, and the mighty longbow bent into a near half-circle as he drew the arrow back until the broad, razor-edged head touched the hornwood stave and the fletched feathers tickled his cheek. A sharp twang, and forty inches of death flew unerringly toward its target. This all occurred in a single, smooth motion - nocking of arrow, draw, and three-fingered release. Each shaft sunk so that only its feathered tail showed that another gnoll bore the mark of the barbarian's archery. Never had Chert shot faster, and his fingertips, calloused as they were, burned from the exercise.

As soon as the gnolls realized they were under attack, they took cover and began an answering release of arrows. Four were wounded before they understood they were facing their human foes, and another pair were struck even as the first shafts flew from the humanoids' bows. A huge missile nicked the barbarian's ear, another glanced off his chainmail shirt, a third pierced his thigh and went cleanly through, and yet a fourth lodged itself harmlessly between waist and girdle. As he had been told, Chert stood fast, exposed as he was, and continued to send his deadly arrows into the snarling enemy, now only a hundred paces away and slowly creeping nearer.

The gnolls were certain that this was a trap. This lone bowman was but a decoy to draw them nearer so that the other man-things could fall upon them, or so that traps that were certainly nearby could snare them as they had previously. Just as the hyenalike humanoids were certain of this, they also knew that there were but a few humans opposing them.

They, the Nonuz of the Bloody Fangs tribe, were not to be so easily taken by such tricks. Not this time. They had found where the weak humans had laid their traps, and in springing them they had taken losses. That was the way of life. Now they would drive the men away from their prepared place, avoid the traps, and hunt these little creatures down. What joy to harry them, running and panting, through the forest! Soon the men would be helpless and begging for death - those who lived through the chase and capture. Most would fall in the hunt, but the gnolls hoped some would live to provide amusement and entertainment before the feast of victory began.

Then there would be much good eating - for, whether roasted or raw and bloody, man-flesh was sweet and tasty!

Trehyeegu, chieftain of the warband, signaled a cautious advance. The lone man had ducked out of sight after another well-sped arrow from one of Trehyeegu's warriors had struck him. Soon the hunt would begin, and he and his warriors would be bounding after men running in fear from their ferocity! Two more arrows arced into the gnoll position, and one lucky shot found a target. The leader of the band snarled and stood up. It was time to charge these men!

A large, black beetle crawled onto the humanoid's foot and up his legging unnoticed. It had large, sharp pincers, and in a second these mandibles were buried in tough hide, drawing blood. With an oath, the hulking humanoid bent to squash the offending bug, but just then he was bitten by a large deerfly and stung by a bumblebee that had alighted on his mangy shoulder.

Trehyeegu, proud chieftain of the Bloody Fangs tribe, let out a yelp suitable for a gnoll whelp and began swatting at himself in an unwarriorlike manner. The frenzied beating of various portions of his own anatomy continued as insects of every type crawled, hopped, and flew around the gnoll. They bit and stung and entered ear and eye without regard for their lives.

Now the chieftain was not alone in his torment, for every one of his fellow warriors was likewise aswarm with a plague of insects. This evidently served as no comfort to the chieftain whatsoever, for a moment later he was running madly through the forest, caroming off trees, trying to swat away the biting things even as he fled in madness from their attack.

Gellor and Chert killed three of the crazed gnolls as they blundered into the place where the men were. Chert was only slightly wounded, and he still had a half-quiver of arrows. He felled two of the humanoid creatures thus. Gellor brought the other down with his hurled spear, and then he finished the job with a swift stroke of his sword. Both adventurers then hastily removed themselves from the area, lest the overflow of insects begin to distress them as they had the gnolls. Chert actually felt a momentary pity for the half-dozen wounded ones who thrashed and howled under coats of crawling death; unable to get clear of die area of infestation, these gnolls had died horribly, bitten and stung to death slowly by hundreds of enraged insects.

As if reading his mind, the bard told him, "They would not have allowed you so easy a death as that, barbarian."

Chert knew that his friend spoke the plain truth, and without further feeling, he left the scene behind.

"What of the others?" he asked Gellor. "Will they rally and come again to hunt us?"

"Those who escaped will bear the marks of their encounter with the little ones of the forest for many days to come," the bard told his friend. "If they rally at all, it will be far away from this place, and the survivors will seek some easier prey to inflict their plundering and cruelty upon."

Chert shook his head, sorry now that any of the foul creatures had escaped, for they would surely harry and slay men and demi-men elsewhere. As long as they lived, gnolls and their humanoid brethren would fight endlessly to conquer and slay humans and their allies - elves, halflings, and the rest.

When they finally found Thatch and Shad several hours later, the boys demanded to hear all the details of the victory. The two boys kept both men up half the night, retelling and elaborating on the engagement. Even though they were still sore from their previous brush with a lone and wounded gnoll, both boys wished in their hearts that they had been with Gellor and Chert when they brought doom upon the humanoids.

Chapter 27

The soft thudding of hooves came steadily closer. The forest around the well-used track of packed clay was as silent as a tomb. Now the horses and their riders came into view around a turn in the pathway. A pair of man-ores rode in front, small arbalests across their laps, lances and swords slung. They wore dirty cloaks of dull brown that failed to conceal the chainmail that was beneath the cloth.

As tough and vigilant as these half-breeds were, the riders behind were more fearsome in aspect, though smaller in size. A broad and knotty-limbed dwarf in steel plate came with a hammer half as big as he, held casually in one hand. Beside him rode a thin-featured elf whose gaunt face matched his thin form perfectly. This elf was old, but not elderly, as it showed in lines and in the eyes that started forth from his narrow face. The robed demi-human smiled and giggled for no apparent reason, and a terrible madness shone forth from his bulging eyes. Behind this ill-matched pair were two more horsed figures, men in armor and bearing many weapons, but they scarcely mattered. Such riders were insignificant in comparison to the evil power of the two who went before.

Hidden in the boughs above, six or seven keches pressed their green-colored hides closer to the branches they clung to and were silent. The terrible aura that radiated from these riders through the Vesve was sufficient to freeze these predatory fiends of the forest into fearful hiding. What they had thought might be prey was certainly something vastly different, and the keches were not so stupid as to stir an inch until the sound of the hoof-falls was no longer heard. The life of the forest became active and made sounds only then. As fearsome as these distant relatives of trollkind were, the silence had not been because of their presence amidst the trees. Their leader pointed westward, and all of the things swung away through the branches. There was easier prey to be had, and the big female who headed up the band smelled losel in the breeze.

Below, already well distant, the six riders went along the trail. "Those keches were scared silly," Keak giggled.

"Too bad we are pressed for time," the dwarf agreed. "Killing a few of those sort would be great sport, for they are tough and die hard."

"Oh, never fear, Lord Obmi, I'd have softened them up a bit before your hammer knocked them over and spread their contents for fertilizer," the elf cackled.

Obmi frowned at his companion. "You'd dare to spoil my sport? Rot your skinny pizzle, Keak, someday you'll go too far. I'd not be pleased if you did such work, for I wish to know if it will take one blow or two to bring down one of those green squirrelkins!"

Giggling merrily, Keak ran his gaze from the enchanted hammer to the magic girdle the dwarf wore around his thick middle. The elf wondered just how great a power these two things conveyed to this one he had to call his liege lord. No matter - if the time ever came, it would be when he had neither nearby to aid him. . . . Keak gave a series of cackling sounds as he considered the prospects of such a time and then went back to watching the surrounding forest for possible enemies. It wouldn't do at all to be taken by surprise.

Obmi, in the meantime, having a fair idea as to the mind of his long-known associate, made a mental vow never to be in a position where the elf would have the advantage over him.

They had come a full two days away from the useless accumulation of weaklings they had abandoned. Keak had used a simple spell to make Obmi appear to be the half-orc cleric, while the dupe of a priest had been changed to look as if he were Obmi himself. The dwarf had to admit that the alteration was certainly much to the mongrel's physical enhancement, while Obmi could hardly wait to be sufficiently clear of the encampment to have Keak remove the dweomer that had made his marvelous features ugly. The dwarf wondered idly what would become of the fools behind. No good, he knew. The question was how long it would take for the priest to blunder or for some other event to bring the whole group into disaster. Well, no matter. Let even fat old Iuz rant and rave about his precious subjects, losels and the rest be damned. He, Obmi the Great, was responsible for the location and safe delivery of the mighty Second Key of the Artifact of All Evil.

"Let us hope we are not interfered with before we reach our ultimate destination!" Obmi muttered without realizing it.

"What?" the elven mage asked in a startled tone. "Do you sense some danger?"

Obmi, dismayed by his own blunder, shook his iron-gray locks and sent a steady glare at his companion. " No, forget it, I merely referred to having some others sent by Lord Iuz intercept us before we personally brought our prize to the Master."

"What matter a welcoming party to see us safely to Dorakaa?"

"Fonkin! Would you share our glory with undeserving nobodies who only come at the last?"

Keak cackled but said nothing further, knowing he'd get precious little credit for his major role in the whole affair and wishing all the glory could go to him alone.

Behind them came an agent who would interfere, and this one had no thought of stealing glory from either. He sought only their death. He raced through the forest, tail streaming, tongue lolling like a dog. The keches spied him, but the leader saw that this leopard was as large as a lion and unnaturally muscled. The panther stopped to glare at the green-hided things. It spat out the spear it carried in its teeth in order to issue a roaring challenge at them. This cry, so filled with hate for foulness and evil as it was, almost brought the keches into battle, but the old female who led them made the others ignore it. Why fight this dark champion of good? It radiated a power that was different, but just as fell, as that which came from those riders they had so feared. Since it was alone, they might triumph - but at what cost? Besides, cat meat was pungent and bad-tasting.

The keches swung on toward the tempting odor that came from the west, and the great leopard picked up its strange burden and was off through the upper highway again.

Gord was angry at himself for die challenge he had given to the fiendish-looking things he had just encountered. He allowed his antipathy for their obvious evil to be voiced in a roaring cough of pure feline hatred. He must watch it more carefully in the future, this allowing the admixture of man and panther to form an integral mind that was neither human nor animal. It was so natural a melding, though, that he knew he would have to exercise continual control to avoid, or Gord and leopard would be inextricably bound into a new, single entity.

A brief time later his ears detected the drumming sound of a fair number of horses trotting ahead. The noise told him that the animals moved along the path. Gord increased his pace, which he had slackened after meeting the keches, back to a run once more. He hated the feeling of his tongue dangling from the side of his mouth, but it being there cooled and refreshed his tired body, and it was the best he could manage while bearing the magical spear in his teeth. He had tried to make it a part of him, as his other weapons were, but for some reason the transformation from man to cat

would not accept the captured spear. This alone made Gord all the more determined to bear it with him when he pursued the hated Obmi.

He stayed well away from the party that rode below, for Gord felt that they would be unnaturally aware of a presence such as his, but he kept them in sight and could pick up occasional snatches of the conversation between the malign dwarf and the unbalanced elf who served him.

Upon hearing the mention of unwanted intrusion, Gord had a flash of inspiration. Slowing his pace, he moved perpendicular to the trail for a few dozen bounds, then paralleled it for a much longer time, nearly exhausting himself in the race to get as far ahead of the six riders as possible. Eventually he had to slow down. Moving at a fast walk, Gord allowed his cat lungs to draw great gasps of air, and his tired muscles to un-knot themselves. As he allowed his feline form to slow and cool itself, he mentally reviewed his plan. After a quarter of an hour of pacing thus, he dashed ahead again, then leaped down onto the track in a series of incredible bounds.

A minute later, Gord stepped from behind an ash tree. He went on two legs now, and the feeling was as strange as other changes in his senses that came with man form. Shapeshifting would take much getting used to - not the form differences, for that part was only a matter of understanding how the mind must mesh with the feline instincts of the new body. But the abrupt changes in locomotion and senses were a bitch for sure! No time for useless reflection now, though. Gord began striding purposefully down the pathway, carrying the spear jauntily as he headed south.

In a minute he heard the sound of distant hoofbeats. Gord stopped and whistled a mournful air he'd once heard in a dive near the river in Stoink, the bandit city. He stood stock still, continuing the tune as the sound of the party approaching grew nearer. Suddenly the leading horsemen spurred their mounts toward him at a gallop, lances leveled for the kill. At the very last moment before their points struck, Gord used the spear he held to vault over their heads. The stupid half-breeds thundered on down the trail, wondering what had just occurred, while Gord flipped upright and bowed to the two figures who now stared at him with suspicion and malign intent.

"Lord Obmi! Lord Keak!" the young thief said with formal dignity and humble demeanor. "I greet you in the name of Iuz, Ancient and Exalted Lord of Evil!"

The wicked-eyed dwarf spoke first. "Just who, pray tell, are you to greet me thus?"

"A humble servant of our Master, Lord Obmi," Gord said with a self-effacing tone. "I am a negligible person altogether, called Stoat."

"Tell me before I kill you then, Stoat. What madness made you dare to stand before me?"

"It is not by my own whim that I come to you thus, Lord Obmi. I am sent by ... He who sired Lord Iuz," Gord said with pride, hiding the fact that he hadn't the slightest idea what demon had fathered the foul Iuz and left his spawn to blight the world.

"You serve Graz'zt?" Keak interjected. "For what reason does that One send you to us?"

"Silence, fool!" the dwarf said, his face blackened by anger at the elf s interruption. Now he would not be able to test this cocky fellow who stood before him with the question he had planned. Obmi watched silently for a few heartbeats as the two half-orc guards came racing back to point their lances at the fellow's exposed back. The man was brave enough, he'd give him that. The dark-haired fellow never moved a muscle or gave so much as a glance as the riders thundered toward his naked back. Obmi spoke then, as the guards looked at him for direction.

"Hold, you brainless bags of shit! I am questioning this man now. Had he been an enemy, you'd have left me exposed to his onslaught with your useless charging!"

The dwarf turned back to Gord. "Very well then, Stoat. Let's assume for the moment that you are who you claim, and that you serve Lord Iuz's loving sire. Why does that One send you to me?"

Gord smiled ingratiatingly. "Prince Graz'zt conveyed word to me by means of a quasit, Lord Obmi - not personally, so what I relate to you is third-hand. However, the demonling, Schwartz by name, was most explicit in relating the commands of Graz'zt, and I shall be the same in telling you - "

"Leave off naming of names - especially those of Ones of power!" the dwarf stormed, an ominous tone in his shout. "And get on with it now, or by the Rusted Rump of the Father of Dis, I'll smear your smiling face across yon tree!"

Gord was glad for the interruption. He had hoped that his stalling wasn't as noticeable as he thought it was, for he was having to invent his tale on

the spot. Furthermore, all the speaking aloud of the demon's name was dangerous business, and he feared it would attract unwanted attention from Graz'zt or his real minions. That this naming made Obmi, and Keak too, as nervous as a new-made thief about to pick his first pocket delighted Gord. These wicked demi-humans were more afraid of the demon father of Iuz than he was. Of course, the thought flashed through his mind, the two undoubtedly had cause to be, for they knew far more of such foul beings than Gord ever hoped to. Still smiling rather fixedly, Gord inclined his head briefly in homage to the dwarfs command and went on.

"Schwar - The quasit who serves the One who shall no longer be named told me that I was to venture southward along the secret road through the Vesve. There I would meet a dwarf of much importance and a powerful elven mage called Keak. The dwarf, called Lord Obmi, would be bearing something of great import to Lord Iuz. My orders were simply to seek you out. Once I had found you, I was to serve you in whatever fashion you deemed appropriate. Once you have been conveyed safely to Lord Iuz, the One said I would be free to go where I wished . . . unless Lord Iuz had use for my services."

Keak was peering closely at him, but the admonition by the dwarf had silenced the elf. It was Obmi who responded to Gord's statement.

"Really. What services do you offer?"

Gord felt more confident now. "As you saw in ample demonstration, my lord, I am far more suited to guard your person than those two who sit foolishly at my back with their clumsy lances - I could kill both without trouble. I am also a skilled thief and have some small talent at woodcraft, tracking, scouting out ambuscades, disguise, impersonation, gambling, and a few lesser arts and ploys as well."

Obmi never blinked at the exposition, and Gord wondered if he had gone too far in daring to mention impersonation. The dwarf nodded and commented, "Modesty is not amongst those many parts. No matter - I'll teach you that soon enough in my services. Being so wonderful as you claim, a small test is in order - is it not, master Stoat?"

Gord felt sudden tension but replied mildly, "As my Lord Obmi wishes."

Obmi screamed, "Kill this arrogant man! "The two guards lunged with their sharp-pointed lances immediately, their horses going forward as they did so.

Before the metal tips contacted his leather-clad back, Gord was bunched into a ball, tumbling backward between the trampling hooves of the nervous horses. Then he was on his feet, all in an instant. He dared not slap the animals into a bolting run, for the horses would surely collide with Obmi and Keak just a few paces to front of them. That would result in Cord's death - or at best his losing all hope of insinuating himself into the dwarfs company. Instead the young thief used the trick he had seen Gellor perform not long ago. As he sprang to his feet he placed a hand under the stirrups to either side, straightening his legs and heaving upward with back and arms as he did so. It worked. One guard fell heavily to the left, the other half-orc sprawled to the right, while their horses, suddenly relieved of their burdens, whinnied in fear and reared harmlessly.

Gord darted quickly around to the right, where he had caught a glimpse of the guard there, face down. That sort of opportunity was not to be missed. The dazed half-breed was trying to gain his hands and knees, preparatory to getting to his feet, when sword and dagger struck in tandem. The villain coughed and fell back upon his face, arms and legs making feeble motions. Gord stabbed again for good measure and then spun to face the other man-ore.

That one had not been so stunned by the fall, and while Gord was busy with his mate, the half-caste humanoid had managed to pull his arbalest free from his mount's saddle. As Gord turned, the fellow was bringing the weapon to his shoulder, looking to place Gord in his sight along the bolt. A series of leaps and bounds so confused the stupid half-orc that he threw the crossbow down in disgust and drew forth the heavy broadsword he wore scabbarded at his hip. Gord sprang in, pinked him on the cheek with his shortsword, and quickly darted back out of range of the retaliatory slash the guard aimed at him.

"Come, come, my stupid ape-faced one," Gord taunted the guard. "You'll have to do better than that to get me with that rusty lump of iron you're swinging."

The half-orc wiped at his bleeding jowl, spat, and waded in, the broadsword swinging in great scything motions before him. Such a technique would work well enough against unskilled opponents, but employed against a swordsman such as Gord, with fencing skill and battle experience, it was almost laughable.

Gord timed his attack so that he came in on the backswing of the heavy sword. A quick step, point straight, leg extended, arm shooting forth. The point of his blade pierced the half-orc's left arm where the mail gaped as the arm moved back. Gord parried the return scythe of the broad-bladed sword with his long dagger, making the guard's weapon go upward and away as he crouched under it. At that instant he continued his closing, coming up arid driving both dagger and sword into his adversary's body. The dagger sunk through steel mesh into the startled fellow's groin, while the shortsword bit through armor and went upward under the ribcage.

Gord leaped back, and the half-orc reeled, then managed to prop himself up with his useless sword. "Spare me," he gasped. "I yield."

Obmi's hammer flew, and the guard's helmeted head disappeared in a spray of crimson. "You failed me," the dwarf said emotionlessly. "That was twice, and once is all I ever allow," he added, looking at Gord as he spoke.

"Your servant, Lord Obmi," the young adventurer said, bowing to hide the expression of hatred that crossed his countenance.

"He fights marvelously well," Keak commented with a cackling laugh. In fact, the elven spell-binder was pleasurably contemplating the possible results of a duel to the death between the dwarf and this black-clad fellow who called himself Stoat.

Obmi scowled at the elf, and Keak fell silent. "I mistrust you, knave, but nonetheless you have earned your place in my service . . . until you show me cause to decide otherwise. Pray to your patron demon that this never occurs! Now mount one of those horses and ride ahead. If you fail to notice any threat, you'll die first."

Without a word, Gord vaulted into the saddle of the nearer of the horses, wheeled the animal, and trotted it off to a position about sixty feet ahead of the others. He was now the official and only advance guard for Obmi and his precious burden. Being careful to watch the trail ahead with utmost caution, he began pondering on how to make certain that the dwarf and his prize never reached the cambion ruler of the lands not too far ahead.

It was one matter to get close to this malign servant of evil. Now the problem was to separate Obmi from his prized possession, the Second Key of the Artifact of All Evil, and to bring him to justice in the process. Gord knew that the former was lar more important than the latter, but he could not dismiss the desire to bring a fitting end to the dwarfs career of murder and worse.

Eventually the sun sank, and Obmi called the party to a halt for the night.

Chapter 28

The quiet of the night was shattered by the sound of an advancing army. That it moved heedless of any opposition bespoke its size and the power of those who commanded the host. It went through the heart of Vesve Forest, southward. It was a Host of Iuz, a horde of bandits, the vilest of mercenary humans, and every sort of humanoid imaginable. Loathsome trolls shambled with the army, and great ogres tramped in its ranks. The force marched on heedless of any danger, and at its head rode the archmage called Ormuz and a high priest of Iuz known as Patch. They went forth to bring wrack and ruin to all who opposed them, and to bring a dwarf named Obmi to stand before their master.

Gord heard the welling sound of their approach before any of the others did. He knew what was occurring, but he was powerless to do anything about it. Keak himself was alertly on watch, and the young thief knew that he would never be able to slay the elf without the magic-user alerting the others. Gord would have no chance against Obmi and the elf and the two humans who served them. To attempt anything would be to throw his life away, so Gord did what he thought best.

"Lord Keak, I hear the sounds of a vast company approaching!" he called softly, sitting erect as he did so. "Shall I alert the others to arm themselves and escape southward?"

"Stand fast!" Keak ordered, and he cocked his large, pointed ear toward the north, straining visibly to hear the faint sounds. After a time he turned and gazed at the man who had so recently joined the service of the dwarf. "You have keen ears, too, do you? I'd say you are altogether too keen, and too ready to turn southward toward the enemy!" The skinny elf cackled at what he had just said, then went near to where Obmi slept under a thick quilt. "Lord, I hear the sounds of an approaching force," he said softly.

"What's that? What force? From where does it come? Witless elf, tell me quickly! I hear nothing at all!"

"It is, I believe, a reception party for your Great Person, Lord, for it approaches boldly down the road from the north - from Our Lord's own lands, from Iuz!"

"Shit and slobbering slimes!" Obmi cursed under his breath as he sprang from his resting place. "Don't just stand there stupidly, you doddering fool! Help me prepare myself for this group that comes! Everything must be just so, or I'll never forgive you!"

Such fussiness nearly made Gord snicker. Were this not the conjunction of the most vile and malicious creatures imaginable, the circumstances of the meeting would indeed be ludicrously funny. A journey of hundreds of leagues, with the fate of the entire Oerth - and more - at stake, and the instrument of it all worries about minor appearances in the middle of a howling wilderness! Gord shook his head in wonder at the whimsical fate that allowed all of this to transpire, for he too was but a pawn in a game whose scope he could not comprehend. "What meaning," he wondered, "and what true understanding, would I have were I of the stature of Iuz, Graz'zt, or any of the even greater figures in this struggle?" Unable and unwilling to consider the whole implication of this, Gord did what he could.

"With your permission, Lord Obmi," he said, "I will ride ahead and bring the approaching Host of Iuz to you, announcing you to those who come to receive you properly."

The dwarf thought about this proposal for only a moment. "Yes. That is mete. You have my permission to go forth as herald."

In a minute Gord had his horse saddled, and he swung up onto its back without a glance back at the frantic activity of Obmi and Keak. As he rode, the young thief wondered what he should do. It would be simple enough to just melt into the forest and be safe. This was not what he wished, though. If there was any chance for him to foil the plans of Iuz, Gord would take the risk and pay the ultimate price if need be. Was there such a chance? He had to try. Shoulders squared, back straight, Gord rode on up the path to play the role of herald of "Lord Obmi" for the oncoming horde of despicable creatures commanded by who knew what sort of disgusting servants of the demon bastard Iuz.

The sounds of the marching army were now clearly audible to the deafest ear. Gord halted his horse and called as loudly as he could, his tone filled with confidence that he did not feel. "Hail the advance! The Herald of Lord Obmi demands immediate audience with the commander of this force!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he was surrounded by a pack of humanoid outrunners. This scum conveyed him rapidly northward past the advance guard of the horde. Somewhere along the route the lowly xvarts and gnolls were replaced by trolls and human servants who cried out, "Make way for the Herald of Lord Obmi!" and the throng of mongrels and hateful humanoids parted as if by magic for Gord to ride through unmolested.

"Your name, Herald?" an authoritarian voice demanded in bass tone.

"Stoat, Herald of the dreaded dwarf Lord Obmi, the faithful servant of the Lord of Ancient Evil, Iuz!" Gord replied in his best formal manner.

"Hail, Herald of the dwarf Obmi. You are come to the Host of Iuz. I am its general, Ormuz, and you may report all to me. Where is Obmi? And does he carry the object which Our Master desires?"

"I am your servant to command, General Ormuz of the Host of Iuz," Gord intoned formally in reply, trusting that no absolute ritual was prescribed for such a meeting. "The Lord Obmi is but a short way south of here, awaiting the meeting with you. He is carrying . . . the object, I believe."

"Believe? You are Obmi's own herald, and you do not know with certainty if the object of all ... this is borne with your lord?"

"My post is new, Lord General Ormuz, and my Lord Obmi is most careful. Details are better left to such ones as you and he."

"This is well said, Herald Stoat - I think I concur with Obmi's selection of you for the role, even though it be but a recent appointment. After this whole affair is concluded, come to me and we will discuss possibilities of service." So saying, the hooded and cloaked Ormuz dismissed Gord and rode past.

Ignored, Gord simply turned his horse and rode with the procession of underlings that followed the leader of the host. He was surprised when the procession he was now part of turned to the west, veering away from Obmi's camp a mile or two to the southeast. A dark woman in rusty-red clerical robes riding beside him spoke to Gord.

"No wonder Lord Ormuz was so pleased with your unexpected arrival," she said. "We are near the Gathering Place, and now Obmi can report to us while Lord Ormuz sits in proper state!"

Gord simply murmured a noncommittal reply and rode on. Perhaps a few hundred advance guards and scouts preceded, the head of the horde. They not only made certain that no enemy was lurking nearby, but cleared the way and now fired great torches to light the path. Flankers likewise chopped at brush and kept the column in some semblance of order. The whole of the force must stretch for miles northward. The forest pathway was narrow. Three horsemen or possibly four could ride abreast along its narrowest parts.. Gord could not calculate how long the tail of this army must be, but it made his head reel to think of it. Their way had been

overgrown with scrub, but the advance had cleared it easily enough. The trail was wider here, and it was growing broader all the while. They had entered the neck of a funnel and were now moving toward its mouth, he analogized. The flaring torches illuminated a large area of grassland ahead.

"Lady cleric," Gord said, leaning close to the dark woman, "I must take my leave now, for Lord Obmi must be informed of where he is expected to meet Lord Ormuz. Is there some password I must use to ride back to the east and south?"

Having overheard the words of Lord Ormuz regarding this fellow's future with the archmage, the woman was eager to make him her friend. "Sir Herald, I am the Priestess Leilah. You may call upon me anytime," she said, and she shot Gord a seductive smile that conveyed the meaning she had more in mind than information or social pleasantries. "The utterance of Lord Ormuz' name is sufficient to pass through the lines, but perhaps you should have this as well," Leilah said as she took a large pin from her cloak and handed it to Gord.

He saw it was a bronze device enameled in the colors of Iuz - black, white and red. A circle confined a triangle which, in turn, bore a reversed pentagram. The circle was a black snake biting its own tail. Its field was white, as was the pentagram inside the red field of the triangle. "My thanks, priestess. You may likewise call upon Herald Stoat," Gord said, and he sent her a glance that promised much. Then he turned his steed and began to work his way back against the press of the throng.

Gord said nothing until he neared the narrow entry to the area Leilah had identified as the "Gathering Place." He supposed it was a rallying point for assembly of forces to raid and make war. They must be nearer to the realm of Iuz than he had thought. The neck was crowded with troops marching into the area. The unit entering happened to be a well-disciplined company of xvarts, little humanoids with big heads and bluish skin. These were evidently the baggage train escorts, for Gord could see carts and pack animals along the trail behind them. Reining his horse to the right as far as possible, he began to ride by the little humanoids, shouting "Make way for the Herald of Lord Obmi!" repeatedly at the top of his voice.

The xvarts were unwilling to allow him to pass, but the warning, the badge he showed in his left hand, and the size of his horse intimidated the evil-looking creatures sufficiently for them to give a grudging path along the left shoulder of their column. Clucking his mount to a trot, Gord

managed to clear the bottleneck just before the mass of baggage clogged it fast. It would take nearly an hour before it was past and the next unit of troops entered. At this rate, it would be noon before the whole force was settled in the open space. This offered hope!

Several ogres blocked the pathway about a bowshot's distance from the turning he had just negotiated. "Make way for the Herald of Lord Obmi, passing by authority of Lord Ormuz," Gord bellowed in his best voice. All but one of the eight-foot-tall humanoids got out of the path, but the largest hulked in the center of the way, unmoving.

"Where ya goin'?" the creature demanded.

"On official duty by leave of Lord Ormuz," Gord replied with as much disdain in his tone as he could, and he thrust out the badge given him by Leilah. "Out of my way!"

Scratching its louse-infested mop of lank, greasy hair, the nearest giant shuffled aside reluctantly, and Gord rode quickly past him, going southward to bring the news to the dwarf of what was transpiring.

Obmi flew into a terrible rage at Gord's report. The dwarf was being upstaged and denigrated by the archmage, and Obmi's fury extended to the one who informed him of this fact. Keak was delighted at the tirade, but for once his demented brain worked to Gord's favor.

"Lord, you are justly wroth," the elf managed to tell Obmi as the dwarf was drawing breath for a fresh string of oaths. "But Stoat is the one who has brought you information which will allow us to slap Ormuz with his own gauntlet!"

"What mean you, Keak?" the livid dwarf replied, withholding his ire as Keak explained his thought. .

"Ormuz thinks to prepare a spectacle where he will be richly dressed and enthroned amidst his host, while we come to him like beggars, hats in hand, to report your success. He will then demand custody of the . . . item you have so cleverly gained and brought to Iuz's very doorstep. He will claim that it will be safer in his care, for Stoat says that there are thousands in the army he commands."

"I know all that," Obmi spat, "and that is why my bile flows so strongly, fool! Is there meaning in your babble, or are you flapping those skinny elvish lips to hear them clap together?"

Keak managed a small giggle at that, but his eyes were hard. He looked down, composed himself, and said, "My Lord, I have a point indeed. Ormuz

in his overweening pride and pomp has neglected to send any message to you. Stoat came on his own to tell you of what was happening, although he was not quick-witted enough to see the potential to disgrace your enemy and turn the tables on him!"

Obmi's face became calmer, and a light of keen interest sprang into his small, steel-colored eyes. "Well, Keak, you have the plan - out with it!"

"Ignore Ormuz and his mass of troops entirely, lord. If we ride now, we can be past before daylight comes. Leave that fool sitting with his entourage while you carry the prize into Dorakaa alone!"

"Yes!" said Obmi, understanding instantly. "The puffed-up fool will think to leave me cooling my heels until he is prepared. Ormuz thinks to sit in state to receive me, as liege does vassal. If I came before his call, he would simply keep me in some corner until he decided the time was right for his show of power. He thinks to win either way, and I, Obmi the Great, will demonstrate otherwise! We leave now - get on your horses, you slugs!"

"Your cleverness is truly astounding, lord," Keak remarked dryly.

"Isn't it!" the dwarf concurred without questioning the statement. "Stoat, you will precede us to clear a path. When we are at the entry to the Gathering Place, you will go there and say no word of me - none! Your duty will then be concluded, and you will be able to count on my favor thereafter should you remain silent."

"As you wish, Lord Obmi," Gord replied with a sinking heart.

Just as they came opposite the mass of humanoids slogging into the way that opened onto the vale where Lord Ormuz was preparing his reception to humiliate Obmi, there was a great commotion. Drums thundered in the Gathering Place, and horns brayed and bellowed brazen tones. There were shouts and cries of command, and the disorderly troop of gnolls slouching their way westward suddenly swung into a fast trot amid snarls and barking calls.

"The alarum is raised!" Obmi said with a tone of wonderment. "And all seem concerned with something within the place. What think you, Keak?"

"That we should ride like thunder to the north!" the elf cackled. "Demons be praised, our luck is getting better and better!"

"Then let us go!" shouted the dwarf. "Stoat, be off with you!"

"Wait! You can't leave now!" Gord commanded the dwarf, trying to think of some reason to delay the departure of the two who bore the precious Second Key.

Obmi's face was a mask of anger, but Keak interposed himself. "I will take care of this one, lord," he said with a menacing laugh that bespoke tomes of insane malice, and as he uttered the terrible cackling the elf reached inside his robes and began to make jerking passes with his hands.

Gord could think of nothing to do but attack. He had his sword unsheathed in a flash, while the dagger seemed to spring into his gloved left hand. Guiding his mount with knee pressure, the desperate young adventurer closed to strike at the vile dwarf, but the elven spell-caster was in the way. Gord's blow struck Keak but lightly, for the horse he rode was prancing nervously and carried him away from the blade even as it darted forth. There was a slim line that oozed blood across the elf's narrow forehead.

"Bastardling man!" Keak screamed at Gord in a voice mixed with pain and fury. That he had dared to attack him was bad enough, but worse still was the effect of the slight cut. The elven mage had begun a casting, and the sudden pain of the wound on his forehead had spoiled the dweomer. "Now, you feeble fart, I shall give you no mercy!"

Gord ducked low in his saddle, urged his horse ahead, and sent an attack directly at Keak. Obmi was cursing, and his hammer seemed to roar as it passed over Gord's head, ruffling his dark hair. Had Gord not suddenly crouched, the weapon would have struck him full on! His slashing blow struck the elf solidly this time, and the spell-binder gasped in real pain at that. Gord heard the loud whirling of the hammer as it flew back to its wielder's hand. He suddenly realized that dark figures raced past the little drama without bothering to notice what was happening. The call to battle was sounding, and there was no time to spare for a minor roadside dispute.

A string of glowing darts leaped from Keak's outstretched hand, and their impact brought terrible pain to Gord's chest. The rush of agony did not prevent his own attack, however, and the razorlike edge of his shortsword nearly severed the elf s rigid arm. Keak shrieked in pain at this wound, and Gord managed to get close and deliver a double attack with dagger and sword before the mage could cast another spell upon him. Both blades sank home, and the elf reeled in his saddle. Obmi was cursing nearby, but the dwarf was unable to cast his enchanted hammer into the confused melee for fear of hitting Keak.

Flames gushed from Keak's fingertips, searing both Gord and his horse with their licking tongues. The animal screamed and reared, throwing the

young thief from its back. Gord tried desperately to hold on, but all he managed to do was pull the spear from its lashings as he fell. This slowed his tumble, and allowed him to land on his feet holding the spear. Sword and dagger were somewhere on the ground. The burned horse was gone into the woods, crashing and blundering its way from the torment it had just suffered. Obmi's whirling hammer struck Gord on the shoulder and sent him lurching toward Keak, who was readying a fresh spell.

Without considering it, Gord stabbed with the long-bladed weapon, managing to put the point well into the elfs thigh. Then he withdrew the spear quickly, threw it flit at the dwarf, and bent to retrieve his sword and poniard from where they had fallen, for the cat's vision he now had enabled him to see both weapons clearly.

The spear flew true, striking Obmi in the chest as he was extending his arm to receive the returning hammer. The metal of his armor saved him, for the steel of the spear's head barely pierced his flesh. The blow caused him to drop the hammer, though, and the dwarf was forced to clamber down from his saddle to recover his prized weapon. As an afterthought Obmi flung the spear toward his adversary, but it went harmlessly past Gord and struck a tree bole.

To prevent the elven spell-caster from his magical work, Gord slapped the flat of his sword blade across the elfs horse with all the force he could. The animal leaped and bucked, kicking wildly when the blow fell, and Keak pitched from its back, just as Gord had been dismounted but a moment previously.

By this time the dwarf had managed to pick up his hammer and climb back atop his horse, and Gord had to dive to avoid taking another blow from the flying weapon. Gord continued the leap as a series of rolls, flipped to his feet, and struck a blow at the elf as he regained his feet. The blade cut through the robe Keak wore and seared the flesh of his skinny body as it passed, but it was no mortal wound. Gord mentally thanked his patron deities for Obmi's decision to leave his other two guards behind as unnecessary encumbrances to his plan. Had those two been here now, the young thief knew, he would have been dead. As it was, things were looking very desperate.

Keak was babbling rapid, unintelligible syllables now, while Obmi kept Gord busy ducking his hurled hammer. Gord decided to try to finish Keak and then see what the dwarf could do one-on-one. He sprang close and

thrust both blades full into the thin body of the elf just as Keak was loosing his fell dweomer at his adversary. Keak managed a startled squawk, then lunged limply, suspended from the blades that passed through heart and liver.

Gord made no sound at all, for he and his weapons had been turned to gray stone.

"So much for both of you, then," the dwarf hissed, looking upon the strange tableau with some surprise. "Who would have thought a man such as that one could have done for a mage of your power, Keak?" he mused. "Have you no cackle for me, elf? No, I suppose not, for your foul spirit must be screaming its way to the Abyss even as your dead ears fail to hear my words. . . . But you haven't failed me, Keak! You, and Stoat too, have served me well. My thanks, Stoat, for ridding me of this one who always schemed to usurp me. Keak, you have rid me of one who was bent on my downfall, of that I am sure. Now I leave you, and may you rot for eternity in torment!" So saying, Obmi rode away to the north once again, mimicking the dead elfs maniacal cackling for a time as he went.

Chapter 29

A great battle raged in the valley called the Gathering Place by the minions of Iuz. Mordenkainen and his captains had set a careful trap. Had Lord Ormuz brought Obmi to the place immediately, the plan might just have succeeded, for the whole deployment and attack were well done. But Ormuz did not bring Obmi and the Second Key to his grand pavilion in the grassy clearing, and a company of unusually careful scouts in Mordenkainen's force discovered enemies lurking at the western end of the vale. Most of these gnolls had been slain on the spot, but a few managed to escape and raise the alarm. Mordenkainen had no choice but to close the jaws of his hidden array and hope that the prize lay within.

Bands of wild elves and their sylvan kin were thrust along either side of the valley. Wood gnomes accompanied these elves, and all were hated foes of the humanoids. They would neither give nor ask quarter of Iuz's foul troops. At the head of the valley were ranked the soldiers of the archmage - trained units of men and demi-humans well armed with bows and arbalests, pole arms, and the full panoply of war. Scattered throughout these stout companies were many minor spell-casters of both clerical and magical sort, while Mordenkainen stood with the archmage Bigby and the seven other mages and wizards who, with Bigby, formed the Magical Circle of Eight. When Ormuz's camp sounded the alarm, the army of Mordenkainen rolled forth to bring the enemy to battle.

The two arms of the force held fast in the woods, while the main body of the army came marching across the width of the vale toward the humanoids. The flanking companies were growing stronger as the movement occurred, for as the central mass came closer to the foe, they freed flanking units that likewise moved eastward. The long, inverted U-shape of Mordenkainen's array was slowly changing to resemble a small, tipped C-shape, with the open portion along the secret roadway that ran from south to north within the eastern heart of the sprawling Vesve Forest. All this occurred over a period of hours, of course, with much fighting and magical exchange taking place.

Ormuz himself was a potent archmage, and with him was the high cleric called Patch, plus an assemblage of dozens of lesser magic-users, clerics, shamans, and witch doctors - the latter two sorts of spell-workers being of humanoid sort exclusively. At the first onset of Mordenkainen's host, the servants of the vile cambion began casting their spells. They were met and

answered by the advancing army, of course. Some terrible losses were initially incurred thus by both sides, but the lesser spell-binders were exhausted or slain, while the greater neutralized each other for a time.

This brought elves and men into the melee with gnolls and ogres. The preponderance of archers and disciplined troops belonged to Mordenkainen, while Ormuz possessed a greater weight of soldiers and ravening creatures such as trolls of all sorts and chimeras unleashed as hounds by the evil leader of Iuz's horde. Minor demons and elementals struggled and fought, while men and demi-humans contested with humanoids and renegade humans.

It seemed at first that the sheer numbers of foul humanoids would prevail, supported as they were by nearly unkillable trolls, ogres, and the like. Whole rows of screaming xvarts and goblins, gnolls and hairy bugbears fell to storms of arrows and bolts, but they poured into the valley in the thousands and came on undaunted by the slaughter of their fellows. The stalemate between the spell-casting forces of the opposing armies was illusory, however. Mordenkainen alone was more than a match for the archmage Ormuz, and together with Bigby he held the enemy in check. Thus, the seven others of the Circle were free to roam the field. With their power they brought down the trolls, slew the chimeras, and sent the great ogres down into death. Without such creatures to stiffen diem, the swarming bands of humanoids and outlaw humans began to lose heart and retreat.

In desperation, Ormuz sought the dwarf Obmi, desiring to hold and use the power of the Second Key, for that artifact would certainly have tipped the balance in favor of his forces once again. But neither Obmi nor the second portion of the Artifact of All Evil could be found.

Then Ormuz called forth a great demon, one of the six hundred and sixty-six who were the demi-lords of the Abyss. The thing that answered was not Balor himself, but one scarcely less powerful. The demon demanded a terrible price for service, and Ormuz agreed, for he had no other hope. The huge demon rose with a roar of awful laughter over the battlefield, and the men and demi-humans of Mordenkainen, even those of the Circle, lost heart just as their foes rejoiced and regained courage to fight again at the sight of the terrible, bat-winged monster.

Mordenkainen himself, mounted on a great cloud dragon, went to meet the demon, and with him went the lords Eraj and Felnorith, whose steeds were griffons. At first the contest was even, but both of the armored

fighting men who were sworn vassals of the archmage bore weapons that caused the demon harm. Both of these brave men attacked fearlessly, and as the demon turned to combat their attacks Mordenkainen sent his spells at the monster. The demon withstood most of the power so sent, the magic seeming to fall harmlessly away, but not all of these attacks were resisted.

A great plane of force nearly tore the dark wing from the demon's right shoulder, while both Eraj and doughty Felnorith smote him with their swords. The fiend flew straight for the archmage then, grappling with the dragon he rode to cause the rider to cease the painful dweomers he sent upon his scaled hide. Both dragon and rider were prepared, and as the drake closed its great jaws upon the demon, Mordenkainen actually reached forth over the dragon's neck and laid his hands upon the demon, drawing its powers from it. The demon was already much weakened by its fighting, and the dragon was clutching it fast with its claws while it bit and tore with its teeth. When the archmage released the demon's energy by his touch, the thing uttered a shrill scream that was audible over the whole battlefield.

Heads turned upward at the sound, and the forces who fought for Iuz saw their champion collapse into itself, imploding with a dull sucking noise that was followed by a thunderclap as air rushed in to fill the void where the huge demon had been. The concussion sent all three men and their riding-creatures spinning downward, stunned and helpless. Despite this, the battle had turned in favor of Mordenkainen's army, and these troops advanced with a roar when the demon was slain.

At that moment both Ormuz and Patch sought to use their powers to escape the coming disaster, but Bigby had drawn near enough during the combat overhead to cast a disjunction of magical forces over the pavilion where the two servants of Iuz were. Unable to escape, both Ormuz and Patch sought to sell themselves as dearly as possible. In the end both died, however, while Mordenkainen and his two vassals, Eraj and Falnorith, as well as the cloud dragon, managed to survive their falls.

The victory was by no means complete. It was a hollow one, in fact. The circle did not close properly, and many of the humanoids and brigands managed to escape. Many of Mordenkainen's troops had been slain or wounded, just as the archmage and his lords were hurt. Three members of the magical band commanded by Bigby had met irrevocable death.

Worst of all, the reason for the battle had proved fruitless. No Second Key was there for the taking. Lamenting his failure even as clerics healed

his wounds, Mordenkainen the archmage, commander of the Obsidian Citadel, realized suddenly that beings of vaster power than his own had manipulated him, just as he had sought to manipulate others to gain the Key. Laughing ruefully at this joke, he wondered if perhaps there weren't strings moving those who had moved him. . . .

The work of finding and aiding the wounded, burying the dead, and clearing the battlefield went on all the next day. Freed from his duties, the elven fighter-mage Melf toured the area to observe at first hand the whole of what had been accomplished by the defeat of the horde of Iuz. There was much loot, but his lieutenants would see that his share was properly allotted, for the elves who had fought under his command had performed heroically. In fact, Melf had personally slain several ogres and a troll as well, after having spent all of his magical power against the enemy.

At the trampled place where paths met, Melf discovered a stone statue of a man. Crushed beneath this toppled lith was a barely recognizable elf. ... It took only a moment to carefully remove the statue. Melf was incredibly strong, and he did the work alone. Then he emptied his canteen upon the stony form to wash away the stains somewhat. Finally he searched the stiff corpse that had been Keak the renegade elven mage, finding no clues as to Obmi's whereabouts, but keeping several items of possible use discovered in the process. That done, he rounded up a few soldiers to stand guard over the statue, telling them to remain on duty until he could return.

"... be damned to hell!" Gord cried, jerking his dagger and sword free. Then he started and stared. No enemy stood before him! It was day, and he had just pulled his blades from nothing but air!

"Relax, Gord," a familiar voice said from behind. "All is well."

He tried to turn with catlike speed, ready for any new enemy, but instead Gord managed only a creaky and doddering step and nearly fell to the ground. His limbs felt like stone and his head ached fearfully. Every time his heart beat there was a pounding in his ears and a throbbing pain in his brain. "What's wrong?" he said aloud to himself.

Melf, at a distance where any initial swing with sword or dagger would not harm him, spoke to Gord again. "Move slowly, and do not attempt anything strenuous for the next few hours. You've just been returned from a stone statue to flesh and blood again, and your systems are in need of some time to restore themselves."

"Then Keak managed to escape . . ." Gord said softly. "Look there, beside that tree. You skewered that crazy bastard fairly before he managed to petrify you. That's of no import at this time, though. Tell me, what became of Keak's master, the dwarf Obmi?"

Gord sat down on the hard-packed earth and told Melf all that had occurred last night. These details filled in a picture that the elf was all too sorry to view.

"The filthy little bugger has certainly gotten away again - and at least a full day's start, too!" fumed Melf. "Perhaps there's still a chance. I'll tell Lord Mordenkainen of this, and he may be able to find Obmi and gain the Second Key yet!"

At that moment Gord was feeling awful - sick and dizzy and too weary to care what became of the artifact. Melf started to leave, then stopped, peering into the sky to the north where a huge black cloud had suddenly gathered.

"Either that's a bad omen, or I am no mage!" - he exclaimed. "I mislike that, Gord. . . . Look at the shape of that cloud. What does it resemble?"

"I don't know," Gord replied, trying to focus his bleary eyes. "Maybe it's a giant toadstool with a pointy lump atop it. Hmmrn . . . the lump rather looks tike an old crone in a tall hat, doesn't it?"

There was no reply. Gord stopped his useless peering at the cloud, looking instead for Melf, but the fighter-mage had gone.

"Without a goodbye, or giving me a chance to properly thank him," Gord mused, "he just vanishes. I am beginning to think that all elves are flighty, if not as mad as Keak was!" He groaned and struggled erect unsteadily. Remembering the spear, he tottered amid the nearby trees, and a moment later reappeared on the pathway. He walked unsteadily with the help of the spear, and his clothing was dirty, but nonetheless, Gord was making his way southward in the direction his comrade awaited.

Behind him, unnoticed, the black cloud grew denser still, settled to the ground, and then wafted away as quickly as it had gathered.

Chapter 30

"Something dampens our powers, Lord of Evil," the mage Vayne explained nervously as Iuz strode into the scrying chamber atop one of the greater towers in his dreadful palace. "If the others were here, I am certain we could get through, but with nothing but petty little weaklings to assist me, I can do nothing," the magic-user whined in his fearful, nasal voice.

"Stop that," the cambion said without looking at the anxious man who scuttled a pace behind him. Iuz was in his massive demoniac form, and his long legs propelled the corpulent mass of his red-skinned body along at a pace that Vayne found difficult and undignified to keep up with. The cambion liked that, for the whining spell-binder had to come flapping after him or else risk his displeasure. Iuz stopped before a massive vessel of beaten copper and brass. The inky stuff within it was dead black. The surface should have reflected an iridescent sheen. Strange!

"You see Lo - "

"Silence!" Iuz bellowed, and Vayne nearly collapsed in fear at the command.

"Why is it so dark in here?" the cambion demanded.

It had suddenly grown particularly gloomy in the chamber, and the shaking magic-user hastened to a nearby window to find the cause. "There is a great mass of clouds overhead, Lord Iuz, as black as I have ever seen! Perhaps some enemies send weather-magic against us. . . ."

His master wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention to his words, so Vayne allowed his sentence to trail off. Iuz was still at the great scrying basin, peering into the thing fixedly.

"Little man, I feel that some event of great import is about to occur. It is of favorable sort, I am certain. Be gone when I cease my speech, and I am enough talking!"

This statement was punctuated by the slam of the chamber door. Iuz smiled an eerie, evil smile, and then he concentrated on the liquid. Instead of growing lighter, the absolute blackness of the surface increased, as if the stuff was absorbing what little illumination fell on it. The cambion bent closer, then leaped back with undignified haste.

The oily liquid in the massive pool erupted in a geyser that struck the ceiling almost twenty feet above its surface. As the droplets pattered down throughout the room, a pair of women appeared. Before Iuz's startled gaze

stood Iggwilv, his mother, and Zuggtmoy, Demoness Lady of Fungi. Between them, grasped by both, was die Second Key!

"For one who calls himself the Eldritch Lord of Evil, - you look rather startled - 'thunderstruck' is the word! Weren't you expecting us?" Iggwilv said, and as she asked the question she smirked at the figure beside her.

Zuggtmoy the demoness smirked back at the crone who was possibly the oldest and most powerful human ever known, then smiled broadly at the cambion. "Iuz, my love, it has been too long!"

Recovering his lost dignity, Iuz drew himself up to his full height and spoke with firm tones. "Both of you, assume a more pleasing form immediately. But first, you may hand Me that which you have brought."

Iggwilv shook her head. "Not so fast, my prodigal. Is that any way for a devoted son to speak to his Dear Mother?" Even as she uttered this admonition, the ancient crone, one who had appeared a parody of every child's nightmare of a wicked witch, changed. Her features flowed and changed as her body grew and straightened. Scraggly, gray locks became flowing tresses of hair like spun gold, and face and form matched the radiance of this golden head.

"You brought me forth by accident, and you have been more a mother in the breach than the office, Iggwilv. Cease your foolery and deliver my prize to me," die cambion added with what could have been petulance.

Zuggtmoy too had altered from a horrid harridan to a breathtaking beauty. As voluptuous as her companion, Zuggtmoy's assumed form was as dark as Iggwilv's was golden. As this occurred, the demoness swayed across the intervening distance between them and threw her arms around Iuz. "Greet your lover properly!" she demanded in sultry fashion. "And you too, Wilva, come and join us, do!"

"Stop this foolishness," the cambion said, trying to disengage Zuggtmoy's arms with one hand and fend off the giggling Iggwilv with the other. Iuz dared not offend the one and wished for nothing more than the artifact held by the other. This was not in keeping with his dignity nor power. "I demand you stop this now!"

"Demand?" said Zuggtmoy.

"Demand?!" echoed Iggwilv.

The hard edge of both voices made the cambion hastily rephrase his statement. "My dearest love, My own Mother, you have confused and befuddled Me with your coming, with that which you bring Me, and most

of all with this fond greeting!" With that he clasped the dark form that was Zuggtmoy and embraced her lasciviously. As she laughed, Iuz scooped the transformed Iggwilv into the expanse of his other arm and kissed her too. "There, My most lovely ladies, I make amends!"

Releasing them, Iuz proceeded to kiss each of their hands in a courtly fashion, greeting each by full title and welcoming them to his abode.

Iggwilv smiled, and there was a suggestion of mockery and sly understanding in the expression. "Iuz, My son, you excelled yourself in your choice of consorts. Lady Zuggtmoy is absolutely without peer!"

"Thank you, dear Iggwilv," the transformed demoness said prettily. "I am in your debt, and you will never regret aiding Me."

"Tsch! Do not mention it - time for settling that will come. You and I have much to accomplish now," she added, giving the Queen of Fungi a meaningful glance. "What - " Iuz began.

"Of course," the woman who had given him birth said, "you are wanting information. Well then, attend Me. It was a near thing, for those soft and stupid ones who oppose the true order of things came in their multitudes. Despite their mewling attempts, I found and freed Dear Lady Zuggtmoy. Together we went to her lovely estate in the Abyss, where she renewed herself. What wonderful chats we shared', and what plans we schemed, Lady Zuggtmoy and I! Then, as time was of the utmost, we returned to this mundane plane to set matters on the correct course here. . . ."

"The Second Key - from where did you get it?" Iuz interrupted.

"This?" Iggwilv feigned a negligent disdain for the oddly twisted shape of dull metal and lusterless crystals of dusky hue she still held. "It radiated a dim aura which was discernible to us when we melded our powers and considered it," Iggwilv told the cambion. "So we changed ourselves and went unnoticed to where it was. It was a simple matter to take it and bring it here. Once possessed, its power is such that only a major combination could prevent we two from doing as we wished!"

"Did a dwarf called Obmi bear it?"

"That one was heading directly for a large group of puissant elves - the snot-nosed servants of that upstart Mordenkainen. How that silly trickster howled when we took the prize before his own dogs could snap it up. . . ."

"And the dwarf?"

Iggwilv smiled and gestured to Zuggtmoy. The demoness reached into the low bodice of her gown and withdrew a large, exceptionally ugly toad.

"This is the very same dwarf you spoke of - Obmi? No matter, toads are such dear little things that I had to have him! They love to sit on my fungi, you know," the demoness concluded as she tapped the cowering batrachian on its warty head.

"So be it," Iuz said with a shrug. "He failed - or nearly so. If you wish him as a pet, he is yours until you tire of him."

The Queen of Fungi laughed a delightful little laugh and replaced the toad within her bosom. "You are so thoughtful, dear Iuz."

"It is nothing," the cambion said with forced generosity.

Iggwilv interrupted them. "Come, come, my dears, let us get to matters of import. My little Iuz has a kingdom to expand. There are plans to make. But first there must be a triumphal procession and festival here in Dorakaa! The populace must know of our coming, of the new power of the land, and of its new status as arbiter of all!"

Iuz groaned inwardly, cursing Iggwilv carefully in a corner of his mind that was well shielded from any possible prying by magic. Now, the cambion thought, I understand why Graz'zt imprisoned her in a dismal plane within the Abyss! Iggwilv, it was certain, would not settle for a role of silent helper in matters of state - or any other matters. In tandem with Zuggtmoy - and the two seemed to have become virtual sisters - they would never allow him his prerogatives, nor a moment's peace.

"Pay attention, Iuz!" Iggwilv said with a scolding tone that didn't fit her charming beauty at all. "You were always a daydreaming little do-nothing as a youngling, but that won't be the case anymore!"

"Yes, Iuz, do attend our words," added Zuggtmoy. "If we are to rule a fitting state here on this silly little world, you must be able to do your part, so pay attention!"

Iggwilv took the opportunity to berate him for his poor choices in selecting members for the three groups of six who served him. "It is just as well that Ormuz and the one called Patch chose to die in battle! Had they dared return, their deaths would have been longer and less handsome! Know you that the one dealt with lackeys of Nerull, whilst the other sought to make a pact with your father?"

Iuz shook his head, for he could not speak.

"And those miserable little nothings who sought to terrorize the northern stretch of the Vesve. All they managed to do was stir up an organized force, which slew them and their horde. Now all the forest is lost to us, for

between the woods-folk, Mordenkainen, and the dirty elves there, it will be unsafe to venture amidst that forest for some time!"

Both Rudduj and Bee were dead, too? The impact struck Iuz like a cold slap. He gritted his needle-sharp teeth and asked pleasantly, "What would you do?"

"Teach that minion of yours, Halga, her proper place first!" Zuggtmoy said with a grating voice.

"Then we will assist you in the selection of replacements," Iggwilv added.

Chapter 31

It took several days for Gord to manage the walk back to where his friends waited. The wounds from spell and hammer were worse than he had thought. Changing into his feline form seemed to help. It also avoided the carnivores drawn to the scene of the battle by the smell of blood and death. By the time Gord came to the camp where Gellor, Chert, and the boys waited, he was nearly at full strength again, and feeling fit. His comrades cheered him when Gord walked in, but the expression his worn face bore quickly dampened their joy.

"The news is bad, then?" Gellor asked.

"I fear the worst," said Gord morosely. "Obmi escaped despite all I could do. The vile dwarf is perhaps in the hands of the archmage Mordenkainen, for that one brought a horde of the enemy to battle and routed the humanoids - so Melf said. That one was there, too. I saw him and owe him much. . . ."

They talked long then, Gord telling of his pursuit of Obmi, his feigned service to the demon Graz'zt, and the desperate attempt to prevent the dwarf from fleeing to Iuz with the Second Key. They marveled at his slaying Keak at the very moment the crazed mage had turned the young man into a stone statue by his magic, and agreed that Melf had done a great service in restoring Gord to natural life.

"You might have done worse," Chert said, slapping his friend on the back and hugging him warmly. "To have rid the world of the likes of Keak is a service to all!"

After a bit more discussion, they shared a meager supper and retired. There was much to do now. It was time to get from the forest as swiftly as possible, and get word to those who waited as to what events had taken place. Perhaps it was already known, but the probability of the passage into the hands of the cambion of that instrument of Evil was of utmost urgency to relate. They slept uneasily and rose before dawn.

It was a relatively swift and easy journey. There were none of the evil creatures lurking in the Vesve, although they encountered a cautious group of armed woodsmen and later a small band of wild elves roaming through the trees seeking any enemies who might still be hiding there. Both companies were suspicious of the five at first, but then gave them much honor and respect for their part in what had occurred. Gord made a point of telling both the chief of the wood-dwellers and the elven leader that the

dwarf Obmi had borne an object of evil power toward the realm of Iuz. That news, he knew, would soon spread throughout the forest. Thus they made their way toward the south, and soon they were near to Tusham again.

That evening the two lads averred that they had no desire to ever dwell in that village again. Both were anxious to remain with their three newfound friends.

"We will be most useful - won't we, Shad?" Thatch had assured the doubtful Gellor. "In return for taking us along and teaching us about weapons and the rest, we'll cook and clean up, and care for your gear most thoroughly."

"That we will," chimed in little Shadow. "And we'll never get in the way, either."

"How will you keep up once we're out of the forest?" asked Chert. That put a damper on both boys' plans, but only for a moment.

"I think we can manage," said Shad earnestly to his bigger comrade, "if they'll allow us to put our gear on their horses."

"Right!" Thatch said, understanding his friend's direction. "We can trot all day as long as we don't have to tote all that stuff, too!"

Chert laughed, for he had no intention of making these two lads run behind their horses. The barbarian had already decided that both boys would make sound warriors and hunters with proper training and guidance, and he would see they got it. When they arrived at Tusham tomorrow, Chert had plans to find a pair of small horses for them to ride, and he'd see them properly accoutered in the process - they would earn their gear and keep through service.

The bard had no such intentions, for his duty was to return to his homeland and report there to his liege lord. Unwilling to deflate their hopes, and unaware of Chert's resolve, Gellor merely grunted noncommittally and let the whole thing pass.

"Master Gord, what do you say?" Shad begged.

Having no desire to teach these boys the dark ways of thieving and swindling in the crowded city, Gord shrugged the pleading query off. "Who can say what will come to pass, lads? I am no lover of battles, nor am I much skilled at the hunt... Let us see what we shall see."

The brawny hillman was disappointed at his comrade's response to the entreaties of the two. "Come now," he admonished Gord. "This is not the

way to repay the loyalty of these lads! Of course you can remain with us, boys," he said to the two.

Happy and satisfied, the pair rolled up for sleep, and the men soon took their example. If they were to make Tusham on the morrow, they would have to start early and keep up a good pace.

They had not gone far the next morning when the horses began to behave abnormally. The animals began snorting and rolling their eyes nervously, and it was difficult to keep them from bolting. Thus alerted, the three men loosened their weapons and sought signs of some beast or enemy that might be near, but there were none to be seen.

"This is odd," Gellor said. "I'd have sworn that the animals scented something, but there is no sound nor trace of any predator or lurking humanoid."

"They certainly act as if they smell something most dire," Chert said. "My nose is keen enough, but I scent nothing. Gord, if you used that cat's nose of yours . . ."

"Not this time!" the young thief said to his later regret. "I'll not be taking a different shape before an audience of gaping churls!" Gellor almost used his own power to take animal form himself so as to see what made the steeds so uneasy, but there was no time, for even as he contemplated it, ail three horses bolted. Thatch and Shadow were riding while Gord and Chert walked. They had just switched, and the animals seemed to have calmed somewhat. Then, without any warning, they took to galloping. The bard had no choice but to try to regain control of his horse, then catch those of the lads and rein them in as well. In seconds he was out of sight, and the two young adventurers were left standing in startled uncertainty. This, in turn, was shattered by a horrible sound that came rushing toward them from the woods nearby.

"Boar!" Chert roared in warning, lowering his spear as he said it.

There was a crashing, and a bristling form rushed toward them. The thing was larger than a wisent and had tusks as long as a man's forearm! Its rush bowled over a sapling, and the earth shook under the impact of its huge, cloven hooves. Gord had time to think that a boar larger than an auroch was impossible - and then it was upon them.

Chert's aim was true, but the point of his spear barely scraped the creature's chest. There was a loud report as the spear shaft splintered, and

then the animal was past. The barbarian had been knocked backward by the onslaught, and he lay stunned and bleeding against the base of a tree.

As the monstrous boar rushed upon him, Gord had sprung aside, jabbing it automatically with the spear he had gained from the enemy. The metal of the weapon was enchanted, but it only tore a shallow gash along the creature's flank as it went past. That was sufficient to make it bellow in rage.-The huge swine weighed a ton and more, Gord guessed, yet it stopped its mad charge and turned more quickly than the young thief would have imagined possible. Then it paused for a second, its little eyes glowing with both rage and a cunning that was more disturbing than its fearful tusks and impossible bulk. Gord shuddered but kept the magical spear aimed squarely at the monster's head.

"Come on, pig! I have steel for you to eat."

The boar shook its barrel-sized head, sending a spray of foam flying. The huge mouth opened . . . and the thing spoke!

"That twig you wave so bravely will serve only to pin your own ass, manling," it snarled, and with that it came again.

The thing went from stillness to full charge in a step, and it was all Gord could manage to leap out of its path and avoid the razor-edged tusks with which it meant to cut him to pieces. He was unhurt, but there had been no chance to so much as take a poke at the monster with his spear.

The boar-thing had halted its rush again and stood with its terrible little eyes locked on Gord. "It is good to have a test," it said in its thick, grunting voice. "I had thought never to find one of you as agile as a monkey," and it laughed a slobbering, squealing laugh that made Gord's blood run cold. Sensing an advantage, the devil-boar rushed again at that very moment. Its charge caught Gord this time, one tusk leaving a bloody trail across his chest and arm as it went past. It whirled and tried again, but this time Gord was too quick, and the monstrous thing thundered past harmlessly.

There was no chance to strike it, but now Gord was beginning to time the thing's rushes. The gigantic boar watched him again, running its prehensile tongue over its one bloody tusk while it did so.

"Yes," it said as much to itself as to Gord, "I will drink all of your blood, little man, before I devour your flesh." There was more promise in the tone than threat.

That tongue belonged to no pig. "What are you, boar-thing? It is clear you are no swine, were-type or otherwise."

"You'll never tell it, but know that I am what humans call a rakshasa - not one of the weaklings which are so known to your ilk, but a true one of my kind. I am come from the Nine Hells to feast and bring woe to all here on this plane you call Oerth," it rumbled in its hideous voice.

Gord spat at it, striking it full in one of its mean fiery eyes. "I am happy to know that, pighead, for I have never killed one of your sort before!" He spoke with confidence he did not feel, and hoped that nothing betrayed the fear that was inside him.

The spittle and the taunting brought the monster rushing again, and this time Gord not only avoided its attack but stuck the spear well into its rear ham as it went past. This caused the devil-pig to emit another ear-hammering squeal. Now it gnashed its jaws hideously and slavered and foamed as it did so. Eyes fixed on the young man who stood before it with a gore-tipped spear, the thing advanced slowly. It needed no run to gut this puny opponent with its curved tusks.

There was a sound of angry hornets and a meaty thunking sound came at its conclusion. Chert, with his leg streaming blood and a great bump showing redly on his head, had regained consciousness and attacked while the monster's attention was fixed on Gord. His broad-bladed axe, Brool, was buried in the creature's bristling shoulder! The barbarian gave a heave, his hugely muscled arms straining to free the imbedded weapon. Incredibly, the rakshasa seemed to shrug the blow off. The axe came free, but Chert lost his grip as the boar-thing jerked toward him. Gord had no choice. If he did not distract the monster, it would tear his friend to pieces.

The devil-boar was intending to do just that. It spun on its splayed hooves and began its rush toward Chert. The barbarian was scrambling madly to retrieve his fallen axe, and he would never be able to get clear before the thing had him! Gord lunged, striking just behind the creature's massive rib-cage, hoping that the spear would sink into its lungs or heart. Despite this attack, the monster savaged Chert terribly before it turned total with the one who had dealt it such a wound.

"That brings your death," it rumbled through its bloody mouth. It was bleeding from its wounds, but it seemed no slower or weaker than before. It began to stalk Gord slowly, as if playing cat-and-mouse with the young adventurer.

Although his friend was unmoving, Gord doubted that the demon-boar had had time to finish the hardy barbarian with its terrible attack. Gord kept

away from it, still taunting the thing and jabbing at its eyes with the spear. He knew he couldn't keep the game up much longer, however, for a single misstep and it would be upon him in a second. Gord wished he could somehow assume his leopard form - then he would show the blundering pig what a fight to the death was all about. It was impossible. He could certainly escape by vaulting into the trees, but that would allow the monster time to kill, even devour, Chert. Gord had to stand, man versus devil.

It nearly had him the next moment, as a fallen branch caught his foot for just a split-second. The thing lunged, but as it did so another spear flew through the air and struck it on its wounded shoulder. The weapon bounced harmlessly off, but it saved Gord's life. Gellor had come back.

"Gellor, stay back!" Gord shouted urgently to the bard. "It is a devil-pig, just as the villagers claimed!"

The one-eyed man had removed his eyepatch, Gord noted, and his long-bladed sword was in hand. "I see it, Gord," the bard said loudly. "It is a small and stinking little thing hiding within that great blubbery body!"

Gord jabbed and struck home on the distracted creature, and it gave a bellowing squeal of pain at the attack. The spear had bitten deeply into the rakshasa's jowl, slicing the skin there in such a manner as to reveal its teeth where its flesh had been cut away. That was sufficient to make it completely ignore the newcomer and concentrate all of its savagery on Gord. It came at a trot, and there was nowhere for the young thief to go this time. Praying, he placed the butt of his weapon against the ground, pointing its tip at the monster's heart, bracing himself as he did so. Gellor did his best to divert the rakshasa. He ran forward, sword extended for use as a spear, and yelling mightily as he came. This failed to make the monster waver.

With a squealing that spewed bloody drops ahead of its charge, the devil-boar came forward in an instant. The sound it made as the rigid spear struck its chest and drove into its body was more terrible than any the bard had ever heard. Just as a true boar filled with killing lust would have done, this creature came forward, disregarding the spear that had mortally wounded it. Its charge carried it to where Gord stood, and the tusks and teeth tore through chest and throat in a welter of fountaining blood. The spear went through the monster's whole body - heart, innards, all. As it killed the man before it, the thing itself died.

The horror of the scene froze Gellor for a second, and as he stood transfixed, the rakshasa seemed to deflate. Black blood poured from mouth

and wounds as its legs stiffened and kicked in death. The spear was protruding from its chest and rear, but of the man it had just killed so horribly, there was no trace save a pool of red.

Chapter 32

The demon Kostchtchie, a most powerful if despised lord of the Abyss, offered alliance to both Graz'zt and Yeenoghu, the demon lord of gnolls. This triumvirate, together with the dozen lesser beings who had made common cause prior to this pact, now held sway over fully sixty-six layers of the place. Certain other powerful demons of great stature supported the alliance, sending their servants and soldiers to the three.

A gate was opened between Oerth and the world where giants ruled. Bands of mighty hill, mountain, and frost giants roamed from the Howling Hills southward. Before them they drove the regiments of ores and hobgoblins who had sought to hold the land for the Hierarchs. These troops fled into the Fellreev or away into the open steppes, where the Rovers of the Barrens allowed them no mercy. Some took service with the kinglets of the bandit states to the east, for much of this territory had been freed of the grip of the Hierarchs but recently, and even troops such as these were acceptable to the newly returned rulers there,

Many regiments managed to return southward to Molag, though, where they thought there would be safety. Most died there. The city was soon under siege. First the wild kin of these humanoids made up the bulk of the attackers, but soon enough things far worse than troll and ogre, bugbear and gnoll, were there. The masters of the Hierarchs summoned monstrous creatures from the lower planes to fortify the defense of Molag. Hideous hordlings rubbed shoulders with even worse - daemons of all sorts, and the awful demodands of Tarterus.

In answer to this, the besieging force was sent demons when they cried for aid. The retreat ofluz's forces became a sudden advance again, as hundreds upon hundreds of demons of all manner were loosed to combat the Hierarchs' reinforcements from Tarterus, Hades, and Gehenna. Not only were these forces outnumbered, but many hordlings, secretly despising their masters and favoring the chaos of the Abyss, went over to Iuz. Men and humanoids, even those of power or fear-someness, stayed low and did nothing as demons fought daemons, hordlings tore hordlings or demodands, and were rent in turn.

Monstrous forms hopped and ran, crawled and wiggled, flapped and fluttered in a terrible dance of death and destruction around the city of Molag. Many demons died, but still more came daily, until the whole place

was ringed with them, and the air above the city became unsafe for any who did not serve the Abyss.

Then the Dukes of Hell took an interest in what was happening. They sent legions of their servants to assist the masters of the Hierarchs because their cause was one with Nerull and the rest. Cohorts of abishai - blue, red, green, black, and white devils of winged sort - appeared in the sky to contest with the demons there. From spined devils to mighty pit fiends, the Nine Hells sent forth their companies.

Those who had lesser power died, destroyed forever - whether daemon, demon, demodand, hordling, devil, or any other of the foulness being belched up from the vile lower planes. The terrible battle raged day and night for a week. When it finally ended, all of the things summoned were dead or returned to their own places. It had to be thus, or else the great rulers would be drawn into the contest, and none - demon, devil, or otherwise - cared to risk this over some petty piece of the Prime Material Plane at this particular conjunction of probability, The Hells were satisfied that they had checked their Abyssal foes. There was time enough to take from the demon-spawned Iuz that which he had stolen.

Nerull seethed with fury at the setback, but Tarterus wavered, and if he continued to fight openly then, more likely than not, other of the lords of the Abyss would unite to oppose the conjunction of Evil. The Reaper too decided to bide his time.

Molag fell to the mundane armies of Iuz. The cambion's realm now extended from the Dulsi River in the west to the verge of the Fellreev Forest and the banks of the Ritensa in the east. The writ of Iuz extended northward to the Cold Marshes and south to the Veng River and the border marches of Furyondy and the Shield Lands. Bandit lordlings now pledged their fealty to Iuz, while ambassadors from the nomads of the cold northwestern plains and the strange realm of Blackmoor came with gifts and offers of alliance. Even the master of the distant holdings called Stonefist considered such steps, so great was the fame which came to the cambion upon his overthrow of the Hierarchs.

Of the Hierarchs themselves, not even Iuz knew for certain. Those who had served these men had either died or taken service under their new master. Some few escaped, of course, for the Ten had surely managed to flee somewhere. Rumor said that they had been carried far to the south, but nothing was known beyond this tale.

As the month of Sunsebb brought the chill of winter to the land, the ones who opposed Evil wondered what would follow. Perhaps the night and cold would be upon Oerth forever soon, and spirits dimmed and hearts grew heavy at this prospect. Others, though, understanding full well the contest between Chaos and the rest of Evil, were glad for the seeming victory of badness. These wise leaders sent messages of encouragement to the others who neared despair. "When Evil fights Evil, Good folk prosper. Do not lose heart, for Iuz truly stands between us and a world of utter darkness! There is hope yet."

It was not all well with Iuz. The victories were hollow to the cambion, for he had to share them with the two women who seemed determined to make his existence a hell - no; worse than that. Ordered and regimented as it was, Iuz thought that such would almost be preferable to what he suffered. Iggwilv held the Second Key and would not give it to him. With it in her possession, Iuz dared not argue strongly, let alone attempt force. Zuggtmoy, meanwhile, directed his every move, with Iggwilv's advice and blessing. It was intolerable! Only he knew that somehow he must tolerate it all, biding his moment, the time when he actually gained the Second Key and stood above the two who ruled him as he had ruled others.

Winter howled over Dorakaa, and Iuz wished that the reconstruction of his new palace at Molag were done so at least he could enjoy the benefits of that warmer clime. Thinking of the fair shores of the Pomarj, where snow never fell, Iuz wandered off to the dungeons below his dreadful palace in Dorakaa to see if a little amusement there might cheer him somewhat.

Chapter 33

Returning the former captives took several weeks. Moon and his friend and longtime fellow mercenary, Patrick, would not have it any other way. They saw most of the women and girls safely to their respective homes. Of course they were given rewards, the compensation being a few coppers or a gold orb, depending on the financial capability of the grateful relatives concerned. In the process, Patrick won the favor of a nice-looking lass from a small village in the Viscounty of Verbobonc. Nothing would do but that she be returned home last; of course, and Moon cheerfully agreed to the plan. Eventually, the three brought their weary horses to the stable of the girl's home.

Her father was a well-off swordsmith, and he took an instant liking to his prospective son-in-law, Patrick, and Moon was most happily received as well. After they had spent several weeks with this man, nuptials were agreed to and a date set. Not much later Patrick and the girl were married and settled in a cottage not far from the establishment of the sword-smith. Moon, being reluctant to leave the town, looked for gainful employment, for Patrick had already established a school for weapon-use in the village. In due course Moon joined the local militia, and he was soon appointed chief of the local watch and Captain of the Militia as well. For these services he received ample compensation and was quite content. Eventually he too found true love with a cousin of his friend Patrick's family, and was soon married and raising children.

Far away in Hardby, Deirdre returned. Although she had taken no part in the quest for the Artifact of All Evil, or an insignificant part at best, she was received as a heroine by the Matriarch (Despotrix no longer being a fashionable tide, the ruler of that place styled herself thus). Deirdre was given the post of Justiciar of the Realm, and her brother Oscar was appointed as Dweomercrafter of All Hardby. Neither found the offices or their lives totally satisfying, but then few mortals are given such satisfaction anyway. They were pleased enough, and received much honor and accolades in their offices.

A dark-skinned warrior took service with a caravan going east from the frontier of Furyondy to the Shield Lands. It was a long, slow trip. He left word at many villages and towns, and sought information too, but none knew of the ones he sought. In the process, though, he met many other men-at-arms who earned their bread by offering their swords for hire. The best of

these he recruited - some for positions with the merchants' train of goods, others personally. He was now called Captain Incosee, and the company he commanded was to be known as the Bronze Band. Incosee himself was the color of old bronze, and he chose for a device a bronzewood tree. Deep brown and green were the homely colors of the company's cloaks and tabards.

Although they had but small repute, Incosee and his new free company found employment in the Shield Lands, for the robber lords to the north were active, and many reaving parties were being sent down to harry the lands around. The Bronze Band proved itself repeatedly against brigands and vicious humanoids alike. Soon its renown was such that the brown and green of its emblem were a byword throughout the whole of the territory. Great deeds were done by the company, and powerful fighting men and spell-workers were proud to serve with it. Incosee was knighted by the Earl himself, and the Flan captain sat in council with lords and generals.

The half-elven ranger and druid, Greenleaf, called Curley by his friends because of the anomaly of being baldpated and having elvish blood, strived to enable the faction he served to gain the second portion of the artifact that would enable the unchaining of the greatest Evil imaginable. Although the druids and the Cabals above them were as neutral in their philosophy as Mordenkainen, they were, at least for the time, totally disinterested in the item itself. They desired most of all to retain the balance, not to gain the power of die artifact for their own ends. Despite the best efforts of them all, they failed. In the process, however, Greenleaf worked with dedication and a self-sacrificing that did not pass unnoticed.

Upon returning to his master to relate what had transpired, the half-elf was made to rest and to spend many weeks in study and meditation. Thereafter, Greenleaf was elevated to a position of rare honor and great responsibility. He became one of only three who directly served the Grand Druid of the Flanaess. Greenleaf was now an Archdruid, and he roved the lands around as the great priest of Nature directed.

They waited for two days, but no trace of their lost friend Gord could be found, and there was no sign of him. Gellor decided it was time they must leave. Chert was reluctant, but he also knew that the bard was correct. Duty demanded they be elsewhere, and tarrying two days was near dereliction. When Thatch and Shadow asked what had happened, neither of the men was able to explain.

The devil-in-boar's-form was dead; of that, there was no question. They skinned it while they waited, and saved its huge head for a trophy. What was left they burned, and even the ashes of that fire were buried thereafter. This the lads knew and understood. All that remained of Gord, however, was the enchanted spear with which he had slain the devil-pig. Not even a trace of his blood was discernible after an hour. It was as if it had been absorbed by nature. That the black stain of the rakshasa's blood remained only added to the mystery. They all agreed that somehow things must not be as they appeared, because all traces of their young comrade could not disappear without some causative agent at work. Gellor did not mention to the others that the agent could be diabolical.

"I'll keep the spear, Gellor, and if Gord ever returns it will be ready for his use. Otherwise it is a memento mori which the dogs of Evil will wish to forget as they die!"

"Chert, I find that most fitting," the one-eyed bard told him. "Where will you go with the spear?"

"Back to the hills of my homeland and the fair trees of the Adri. And both of the lads will like it there, I'm sure!"

"You'll have company then, my friends," the bard replied. "I must ride all the way to the distant walls of Radigast City, and this seems a good hour to set forth on that journey!"

The boys rode double upon Gord's horse, while the huge barbarian and the bard carried their trophies, head and hide respectively, with them. They reached Tusham soon enough, and the whole village turned out to receive them when word was known of who was with the two men and what they bore. In exchange for two swift little horses, tack and provisions, they left a few coins and the monster's head in Tusham. The unusual aspect of the devil-boar was evident to all who saw it, so the gigantic head became the most famous trophy in the village. Soon folk flocked to Tusham to view the remains of the rakshasa, and the establishment it hung in waxed prosperous indeed.

Although neither of the boys had had a hand in slaying the devil-boar, mere association with the men who brought in its carcass was sufficient renown. Tusham would gladly have received both Thatch and Shadow as heroes, clasping them to themselves - at least for a time. Neither cared to stay despite all this, for even had Clydebo proved true and made them apprentice hunters as he vowed he would do, the lads wanted no part of it.

They would see the world and remain with Chert. They rode away amid the tears of kinfolk and cheers from the rest of the villagers.

Although Gellor had used his art to heal the terrible wounds his comrade had sustained in the fight with the rakshasa, the bard insisted that the hide belonged to Chert for his part in the combat. A petty dweomercrafter in Tusham had placed spells upon the huge skin so that it would not rot before they found a place to have it dried and cured. In the course of their long journey, they had it preserved properly. Then Chert decided that the hide must be put to some proper use.

Nothing would do but for it to be worked into articles they would wear in battle. Gellor demurred, but eventually the bard accepted a broad belt made from a strip of the thing's hide. Chert wore acuir-bouilli jack of the stuff and thick bracers thereafter. The sleeveless cuirass was incredibly tough and could never wear out, it seemed, while it had a strange property of lessening blows. Both Thatch and Shad were given leather caps to wear, and the remainder of the devil-boar's huge hide covered shields they eventually bore.

The four made their long ride eastward with few incidents along their route. When they finally crossed the rolling waters of the Artonsamay, Gellor bid them farewell and headed south for the Palatine County of Urnst. Chert and his two young charges watched the bard until he was out of sight, and then they continued on eastward. Their destination was many, many leagues distant, but they viewed the journey still to come as a marvelous experience.

The quest for the Second Key of the Artifact of All Evil was ended.

Epilogue

A vaulted ceiling with beams of natural logs supporting it came gradually into focus. It was softly lit by sunlight streaming in somewhere, but there was no strength to allow an attempt to discover the source. A warm breeze played over his body, and this felt wonderful. It made him aware of the softness of the stuff upon which he lay. Gord gathered his strength and slowly blinked his eyes. Their focus was sharper now.

"Who am I?" he wondered. There was no answer in his mind, so he gave up and allowed himself to drift again into the comforting drowse that washed over brain and body as a soft little wave gently covers a sandy shore.

Time passed. How long a time he had no idea, but with its passage came a new awakening. This brought new alertness. His eyes could move, he felt every part of his body, and he knew his name. Suddenly a beautiful face framed by a mane of tawny Hair appeared above him. The eyes smiled, and the red lips spoke.

"Only seven remain to you now, so use them wisely," the voice said, and a pair of lovely lips kissed his forehead softly.

“I… I…”

"Yes, Gord?"

"Where…" he started to ask weakly, but the beautiful female answered before he could finish. "Safe and . . . becoming . . . sound at the Manse of the Catlord, of course. Where else could you be after using one of the special lives he granted for you?"

"The devil-boar - it killed me! I remember now, the fear and the awful pain as…"

Again Tirrip silenced him, this time with her long, cool fingers placed gently on his mouth. "Hush, Gord. Don't think of that now. Later, when you are stronger, there will be time. I am anxious to hear all about it, too!" she said with real enthusiasm. "Catlord knows a little, but he wishes to hear the whole tale as soon as you are able to tell it."

"When do you think that will be?" Gord asked her.

"Now that you have awakened from the comatose sleep of your regeneration, I think you'll be up and around in a few days . . . even if you'll be weak as a newborn cub."

"Yes, I think you're right. I feel ravenous, Tirrip, and very thirsty too. Help me to sit up, and see if there isn't something for me to eat around

here!"

"Just like a male!" Tirrip said with mock exasperation. "Always expecting the female to serve them one thing or another! " She gently helped Gord to sit up, placing fluffy pillows of down behind him and straightening the soft sheet that covered his scarred body. "Don't worry, those will fade into nothing more than little lines in a day or two," Tirrip said when she noticed him looking at the places where the rakshasa had torn open his belly and chest.

"Food!" Gord cried with feigned supplication.

"And some fresh milk to help your body regain its natural strength!" Tirrip said firmly. "You must eat and rest and...”

"And?" Gord repeated, wondering what else he could possibly do.

Tirrip looked at him with a gaze that reminded Gord of a cat eyeing a mouse. "And then show me how you can turn into a huge panther, handsome!" she said. Then she was gone in a whirl.

Gord lay back and thought about that for a long time.